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Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine Issue 112 (January 2007)

ps3 paydirt

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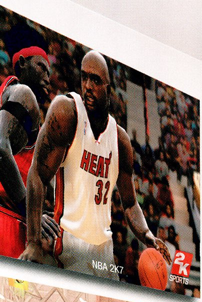

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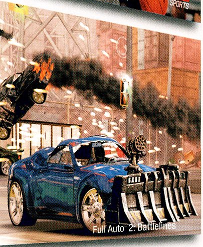
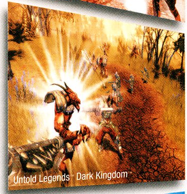
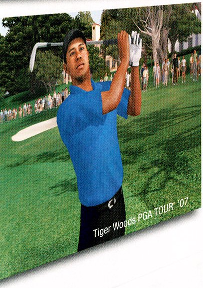
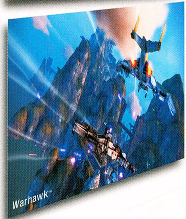
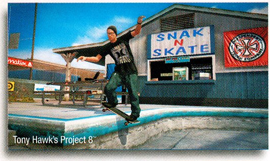
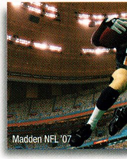




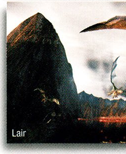








MotorStorm™



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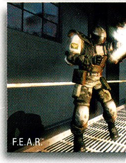

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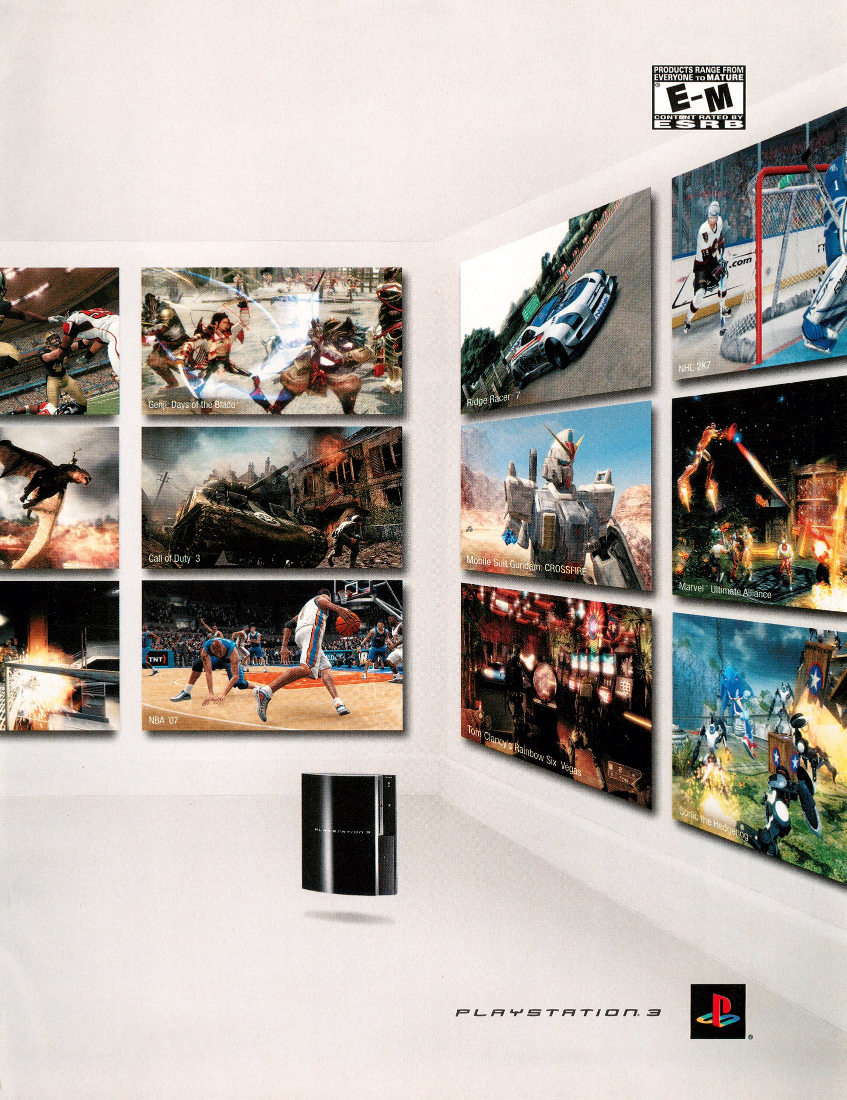
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Ridge Racer 7
Mobile Suit Gundam: CROSSFIRE
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas
NHL 2K7
Marvel Ultimate Alliance
Sonic the Hedgehog
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\\→ Like Magazines, but Shinier

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\\→ Can You Hear Us Now?

Why no, in fact you cannot anymore. You *can*, however, hear the final, drunken episode, in which embarrassing secrets are revealed!

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Issue 112
OFFICIAL U.S. PlayStation MAGAZINE
SONY
NTSC U/C
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DVD ROM

112

Welcome to our World

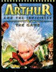
Well, this is it folks, the last *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine* disc ever. Shame, too, as we had some fun PlayStation 2 games coming down the pipeline, including *God of War 2* (sorry, shouldn't have told ya, should we?). Sigh. But we have had some terrific demos in our past as well. I mean, who can forget the incredible demos for *Shadow of The Colossus* and *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*? How about the artful masterpiece known as *Okami* or the rockin' *Guitar Hero II*? Yeah, we had some fun times.

This month's disc is a movie-themed fiesta, with a dash of *Metal Gear* and *Silent Hill*.

Enjoy. And so long, fellow gamers. We will miss you.

PLAY IT

Arthur and the Invisibles



Sample the adventures from the film with this demo and play as the young hero who finds the adventure of a lifetime is right in his own backyard

Flushed Away

Assume the roles of characters from the movie as you make your way through the dangerous underground while fighting against the villainous Toad and his evil plans.

Monster House

Uncover the mysteries of the house, as seen in the movie, and see if you have what it takes to save the neighborhood.

FROM LAST MONTH

Did you find the *Dance Dance Revolution Super NOVA* demo? To find it on last month's disc, press left directional button + Square + Circle.

WATCH IT

Silent Hill Origins

The highly anticipated *Silent Hill* prequel will soon set sail on the PSP, taking us to the beginning of the series.

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

Check out more video from the PSP's first traditional, stealth-action title from the *Metal Gear Solid* universe.

Eragon

Here's a game trailer for this movie-based title inspired by Christopher Paolini's best-selling fantasy novel.

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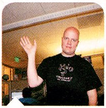
THE OPM FAMILY

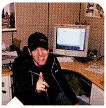
Tom Byron is humbled by the magnificent spirit and energy of the *OPM* staff in the face of such adversity. He cues KT Tunstall's "Suddenly I See" as he finds out what everybody has planned post-*OPM*. As for himself, Tom's going to finally answer all those nice e-mails from Nigeria and then set his clock for 2:00 a.m. so that he can find out how he too can make thousands of dollars IN HIS SPARE TIME! Suddenly, he sees....

Dana Jongewaard is finally going to move to Montana and realize her dream to become a cat herder—all she needs are a trusty pair of leather gloves to protect her from their claws and some earplugs to drown out the yowls. And a lint roller.



Joe Rybicki plans to attend school to become an interstate trucker—CB handle: "Shiny." Look for him to put 18 on the asphalt on the "Coney Run" between Mud Lick, Kentucky, and Dry Prong, Louisiana. It's a lonesome life but it's the only life for him.

Thierry Nguyen plans on exploring the apocalyptic wasteland of America as some sort of hobo mailman. Along the way, he will regale anyone who listens about the days which he and the rest of *OPM* "took thunder and lightning and turned it into an excellent mag."



Giancarlo Varanini will continue his career as a freelance ninja sandwich artisan. Sure, it may not be as glamorous as *OPM*, but come on—how awesome would it be to see your sandwich being made by a freakin' ninja? Exactly!

Logan Parr has really enjoyed his stint at *OPM* but thinks now maybe he can find the time to finally flesh out his cartoon series with all this extra time. He sends thanks to all the readers and demo players for making this Kiwi's job more fun. See you online!

Ryan Vulk will finally have the opportunity to live his dream: He'll have his entire consciousness transferred into his *FFXI* character and live the rest of his blissful life in Vana'diel. All he needs is a scientist to help him with a few details.

Alejandro Chavetta will no doubt return to ~~professional drinking~~ bartending in between trips to visit his strange, foreign people, perched high atop the peaks of the Andes. He can see your house from up there. Really he can.

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Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine (ISSN #1094-6683) is published monthly by Ziff Davis Media Inc., 28 East 28th Street, New York, NY 10016. Periodicals Postage Paid at New York, NY 10016 and additional mailing offices. Ride Along enclosed in all U.S. copies. Single-issue rate: $8.99. Subscription Rates: One Year (12 issues and 12 demo discs) $49.97 U.S., $65.97 all other countries. Ride along enclosed. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine, P.O. Box 55362, Boulder, CO 80322-5362. For Subscription Service Inquiries call us at 800-627-6458 U.S. and Canada, or 303-604-7445 all other countries. Fax us at 850-683-4094 U.S. and Canada, or 303-604-0518 all other countries, or visit our subscription website at service.playstationmagazine.com. Back Issues: Back issues are $8 each in the US, $10 each elsewhere (subject to availability). Prepayment is required. Make checks payable to Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine. Mail your requests to: Back Issues, Ziff Davis Media Inc., P.O. Box 53131, Boulder, CO 80322-3131. Mailing lists: We sometimes make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive their mailings, please write to us at: Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine, P.O. Box 55362, Boulder, CO 80322-5362. Copyright © 2006 Ziff Davis Media Inc. All Rights Reserved. Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine is a registered trademark of Ziff Davis Publishing Holdings Inc. Without limiting the rights under copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Ziff Davis Media Inc. The editors and publishers are not responsible for unsolicited materials. For permission to reuse material from our publications or websites, or to use our logo, contact Ziff Davis Media's Rights and Permissions Manager, Olga Gonopolsky, at permissions@ziffdavis.com. For article reprints and e-prints, contact FosteReprints, 866-879-9144. TM & © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright holders. All materials in this magazine are subject to change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes. The Canadian GST registration number is 14049 6720 RT. Publications Mail Agreement No. 40009221. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to PO Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6. Printed in the USA.

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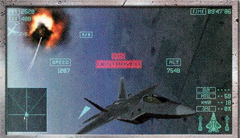

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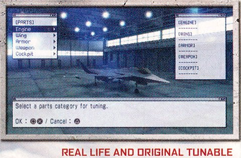

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2-4 MULTIPLAYER WIRELESS BATTLES IN VARIOUS MODES

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PlayStation® Portable

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INPUT

WE'LL MISS OUR READERS, A LOT

Brave of you to write

In OPM #108 (September 2006), there was a brief review of a mech game called *Yuusha*. The review stated the game will be marketed in North America as *Brave*. I love mech games and would like to know the story behind the game and when it will be available here.

Mic
via e-mail

Mic, chill! We received your note like 10 times. We liked how you just kept forwarding it over and over—it doubled our monthly letters! Anyway, to be clear, we did not review the game Yuusha in the September issue. We reviewed the game Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer, *a mediocre action platformer about a little Native American kid (OPM score 5/10). Yuusha was mentioned in the sidebar. There have been games based on Takara's mech series of that name, but—and we actually had it wrong—they've been marketed in the U.S. as Brave Saga. As for availability, your best bet is to check Japanese import stores. OK, hope this clears things up a bit. Sorry for the confusion. Now please stop the e-mails!*

So many questions

Hey, guys! I just wanted to ask you a few PS3-related questions that I can't seem to get an answer to:

1) Is the PS3 backward compatible?

2) If it is backward compatible, how do I get my PS2 data onto my PS3? There aren't any ports for a PS2 memory card on the PS3 (at least that I've seen).

3) Will Oblivion on the PS3 be in first-person view or third-person? The majority of the shots I've seen are in first-person, so I'm assuming it will be in first-person—but I just want to double-check, as I haven't seen or played Oblivion on other systems.

4) Will the PS3 have a rumble function?

Any information you can give me would be greatly appreciated. I love you guys, and I love your magazine.

Marissa Carter
via e-mail

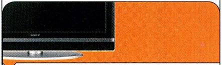
Good questions, Marissa. Hopefully, we have some good answers.

1) Yes, indeed—you can play PS1 and PS2 games on your PS3! But (there's always a but) while Sony strove to achieve 100 percent compatibility for its 7,000-plus game library, whether or not your older games will work really depends. Sony has a site where you can check to see if your games will run properly; it's www.us.playstation.com/Support/CompatibleStatus.

2) To transfer PS2 data, you'll need the PS3 Memory Card Adapter, available separately for $14.99.

3) Actually, Oblivion gameplay is in both first- and third-person. Most people play it in first-person, but the game does allow you to switch the point of view.

4) Sony continues to officially say that the PS3 controller will not have force feedback—not never, not no how! Sony does point out that third parties can—and likely will—develop force-feedback controllers (especially steering-wheel makers).

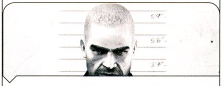


HD confusion

I was wondering which brand and model of HDTV would you recommend for a great PS3 gaming experience?

Jeremy
via e-mail

Jeremy, the timing of your question is impeccable. Check page 98 in this issue for our look at HD systems.

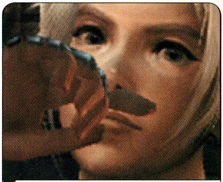


Double dilemnity

Here's the dilemma. I love Splinter Cell and want to buy Splinter Cell Double Agent on the PS2, but I'm also planning to buy a PS3 soon—and I can only wonder, will Double Agent come to PS3?

Matthew Dykstra
via e-mail

Lucky you, Matthew—while Ubisoft hasn't make a formal announcement, it appears that a PS3 version of Double Agent is coming in spring 2007 (as early as March), if you don't mind waiting that long.



The PS2 is still alive and kicking

With regard to John Davison's Big Picture column (OPM #109, October 2006), I'm glad to see that there are still those out there who think the same way I do about the PlayStation 2. It totally still has an unforeseen, positive future in store for it! I'm a late bloomer who just bought the PS2 this year, and I LOVE IT!!! PlayStation has gone from the original, gray, boring design to the cool, up-to-date PS2 design to the futuristic PS3. People have to realize that the game systems and games today keep getting better, and we (the consumers) are going to pay for it.

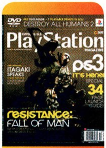
I can go into a Best Buy or Circuit City and look at the rows of games in the PlayStation section, and I definitely see that PlayStation is the winner. It doesn't bother me that games could go up in price, because I look at it as, "Sweet, dude! If this is $59.99, you know it's going to be killer!" Plus, PlayStation has the best selection of games of any platform! You have all your current games that come out and cost between $39.99 to $49.99, and then you have all your "Greatest Hits" that are a whopping $9.99 to $19.99. Hmmm...does anyone remember buying the games for NES? They were around the same prices back then, too!

If consumers want to bitch about prices of games, then they should just go home, buy some PlayStation magazines, read them, and see how far the production of games has come. Appreciate the technology and the people that took their own time to create it.

I'm glad that I bought the PS2. It was one of the best decisions I made this year.

Mikey Berner
via e-mail

Hey, Mikey—we're with you. Okami, Final Fantasy XII, and Guitar Hero are just a few of the awesome new games available for the PS2. And, yeah, the price should reflect the quality and effort of the work, which is why we're so disappointed in Genji: Days of the Blade for the PS3 (see our review on page 74). Our feeling: if you're going to pay $60 for a game, it better be good—real good.



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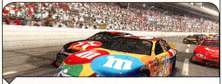
Michael vs. OPM

I read your article in "East vs. West" (*OPM* #110, November 2006), and I shook my head as you failed to mention some of the great RPGs on both sides. For the West, you mentioned *Arena* and the woefully overrated *Oblivion*. Yet you didn't mention *Morrowind*. *Morrowind* paved the way for *Oblivion*, and most RPG vets agree that *Morrowind* is better than *Oblivion*. Oh, it's true. You also failed on that side to mention the greatest RPG of all time, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, or even its predecessor. *Baldur's Gate* breathed life into the American RPG genre. As for the East, you made no mention of awesome titles like *Final Fantasy IV*, *Final Fantasy VI*, or *Chrono Trigger*. Anyway, just thought I should rectify your gross overlooking. Thanks.

Michael
via e-mail

Article writer Jeremy Parish responds: "You may have noticed that the M in OPM *means 'magazine,' not 'encyclopedia.' Our list was in no way comprehensive (and we even said as much). So buck up! You're still allowed to love your favorite RPGs."*



Sounds more like NASTYCAR

After reading the "People vs. EA" article in the October issue (*OPM* #109), I think that it is imperative to point out how the EA representatives twisted their answers to make the company sound better than it really is. You can easily poke holes in their answers! For example, when talking about innovations, EA quickly mentioned *Madden*, but they failed to mention games such as their *NASCAR* franchise, which still has 80 percent of the game material from four years ago. Also, when you mentioned the rushed *NCAA Football 07* for the PSP, they quickly jumped to another game and talked about how they didn't screw that one up. Last but not least, I want to address the monopoly situation. I know that most people don't care about *NASCAR*, but some people dislike EA's games so much they are willing to pay $100 for a *NASCAR* game that came out in 2003 from Papyrus! Doesn't that tell you something about EA and how they could be doing a much better job with their NASCAR monopoly?

Kris W.
via e-mail

PSP lol-cations

In your November issue (OPM #110), you did an article on locations for playing one's PSP, and you asked for any crazy stories we had about playing games in random locations. Personally, my favorite memory of PSP gaming was in my synagogue. Every Sunday before Hebrew school in my sophomore year of high school, we had gatherings of PSP owners. We all played Burnout Legends and other games, and if we lost, we passed off our PSPs to those who gathered around. It was a lot of fun, and we did this with a lot of games as the year progressed. My personal favorite example of this was when I got GTA: Liberty City Stories and brought it to play before class. I would stick the earbuds in my ears, and I'd always feel bad as I killed random pedestrians as my rabbi walked by and said, "shalom" to me. I felt pretty funny playing my PSP—specifically GTA—in my synagogue, and just thought you guys might find that humorous, too.

Aaron Stayman
via e-mail

YET ANOTHER SPECIAL NOTE TO OUR READERS

On November 21, 2006, the staff completed the final issue of Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine. *One week earlier, on November 14, parent company Ziff Davis and its corporate partner Sony Computer Entertainment America stunned everyone when they jointly announced that* OPM *would cease publication after over nine years. Fan reaction was immediate and gratifying. The overwhelming majority of you sent your condolences and best wishes to the staff through e-mail and on the message boards. Here are just a few of your kind thoughts and memories. And thanks everyone for being the best audience a magazine could ever ask for.*

YEP, WE WERE PRETTY SHOCKED

I was shocked to learn that your magazine will soon cease publishing. (Not, I'm sure, as shocked as some of you were, but you do have significantly more at stake.)

I guess this was inevitable. Since the PSP debuted there has been talk of adding some PSP content to the magazine, but downloadable demos are more cost efficient than bundling a UMD in a print magazine. With the PS3 poised to take a similar approach to demos, there's no need for a demo disc. That's all *OPM* is, right? Just something used to get demo discs in our hands.

Maybe it was that way at first—after all, one of the main reasons why I chose the original PlayStation over its competitors was the availability of demo discs, specifically in your magazine.

But *OPM* has evolved over time to be one of the best publications about gaming—with or without a demo disc. Personally, I haven't played a demo disc in months and I couldn't be happier with my subscription. Issue 110 was probably the best issue you've ever produced. The quality of the articles, interviews and reviews made it worth twice the cover price. Issue 111 was pretty good too, and marked a change to the headline font that I certainly appreciate.

OPM has changed over the past nine-plus years to be THE magazine for gaming adults, a magazine that explored gaming culture, giving us a grown-up perspective on our hobby in a grown-up format. *OPM* proved that there was a place for actual journalism in video game magazines, not just press credentials to get early access to games.

Maybe I'm not typical of your readers. I have every issue; I even replaced the one that got damaged when my basement flooded. I've also had my name printed in the magazine once or twice. I realize that it's not your decision, and that I don't have access to the numbers that convinced some executives that eliminating your publication was a good business decision, but when *OPM* goes away, the whole gaming community will suffer a loss.

And while I can't change that, I did want to thank you all for doing such a great job, for being more than just another magazine. You've been a terrific example of how to approach games and gaming for close to a decade, and should be very proud of what you have accomplished.

Thank you so much for making *OPM*, and for having such a special place in my heart and on my bookshelf. I wish you all nothing but continued success in the future, and I know that you will make a positive difference wherever you go.

Jonathan Petersen
Via e-mail

AGREED: TIME TO MOVE ON

I am writing to thank you for putting out an excellent magazine, month after month for the last (nine?) years. I have been a subscriber since 1999 (still have all the demo discs) and I have never written to say thank you. I recently heard of the cancellation of OPM, and I'd like to say that I'm sorry. It crossed my mind that it's funny what I take for granted, and that I don't notice what I have until it's gone; or take the time to say thanks until the very end.

I started buying OPM as a way to get game demos. I barely read the first few issues. The magazine itself was just a hunk of paper that came with the demo disc. That attitude didn't last long. The reviews became (and have been to this day) the major factor in deciding what games I buy or don't buy. The previews got me excited about what would be coming, and the recent interviews with industry folk have become my favorite (and first read section, after the calendar.)

Without OPM, I probably never would have played Rez, Kinetica, Katamari Damacy, Ico, or countless other games.

I'm really sorry to see OPM go. Sony seems to have made a lot of odd and unpopular decisions in the last year, from the price of the PS3, to the number of launch units available, to the court case that led to the closing of Lik-Sang, to the shutdown of OPM. I could be angry with or bitter at Sony, but it wouldn't do any good. I could say that I'll boycott Sony, or that I won't buy a PS3, or that I won't buy new games, but it won't matter.

There are plenty of people out there who will buy a PS3, and Sony knows it.

The past is, though, the past; and I need to look to the future. I'll probably get a subscription to EGM. Maybe I'll see some of your writing there. Good luck, in whatever comes next for each of you. I've enjoyed your work in the past, and I'll be sure to look for your names (and faces- ^_^) in magazines to come.

Jim Finney
Via e-mail

SADLY, IT'S TRUE

Is it true? No more printed issues of OPM??? Please say it isn't so. Where will I turn; what will I do without your shining beacon of light to guide me throughout the plethora of games, movies, accessories and countless media out there related to the PlayStation? Please tell me OPM will live on...please.

IT'S OK TO CRY

It truly pains me beyond words to find out that OPM is no more. In fact, to a large extent you folks feel kind of like family or war buddies. Once the news sunk in that OPM was gone, I ended up balling my eyes out for a good hour like a little sissy boy and I am usually rather bottled up too. This feels just as bad as any of my grandparent's funerals.

I wish to thank you all, each and every single last one of you at OPM (past and present) for everything you have done in the past nine-plus years. I shall be forever indebted to you all for the great writing in the reviews, previews, etc. and for all the fond memories and the bust-out-laughing moments. Your magazine has truly touched me. Ladies and gentlemen of OPM, I tearfully salute you all!

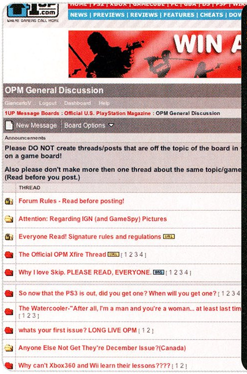
I shall dedicate each and every moment of my PS1, PS2, PSP, etc. game-play to all of you. Now, I will go onto FFXI & set off in-game fireworks in honor of OPM...

Mr. Donald V. Losel, Jr.
Via e-mail

THANKS FOR LISTENING TOO

After listening to the last radiOPM, it finally hits me that OPM is really going to be gone. I started reading OPM around issue 61, the Kingdom Hearts cover, toward the end of my middle school years. Throughout my entire high school career, I've been devotedly reading OPM and subscribed and re-subscribed over and over again because of the top-notch coverage of all things PlayStation, the amazing layouts (Burnout Revenge, FFX-2 and MGS3 come to mind) and some of the best reviews I have ever read (SpongeBob SquarePants: Battle for Bikini Bottom review was so great that I used it as a Journalism 1-2 finals project). Because of this, OPM has been a major inspiration for me chasing after journalism to the point that I'm currently applying to San Francisco State University to be closer to OPM headquarters. It's like a master finally parting with the apprentice. I would like to say thank you to the entire OPM staff.

Daryl "DJ_hugo" Bunao
Via e-mail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THREAD

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Attention: Regarding IGN (and GameSpy) Pictures

Everyone Read! Signature rules and regulations URL

The Official OPM Xfire Thread URL [1 2 3 4]

Why I love Skip. PLEASE READ, EVERYONE. IMG [1 2 3 4]

So now that the PS3 is out, did you get one? When will you get one? [1 2 3 4

The Watercooler-"After all, I'm a man and you're a woman... at least last tim
[1 2 3]

whats your first issue? LONG LIVE OPM [1 2]

Anyone Else Not Get They're December Issue?(Canada)

Why can't Xbox360 and Wii learn their lessons???? [1 2]

OPM MESSAGE BOARDERS, WE SALUTE YOU!

From yelling at us for anything from review scores to demo disc contents to debating the fine points of the PS3 launch or EA's true commitment to the PlayStation gamer, the *OPM* message boards (at boards.1up.com) have been a constant source of information, curiosity, fun, frustration and enlightenment to the editorial staff. In tribute, we present here a comprehensive list of everyone who has ever contributed to the boards. A big special thanks to Adam Burnett, a.k.a. FinalFantasyRuler88, for pulling this list together.

Abandoned Asylum
AClockworkOrange
Adrinue
Agent49
AlexiaAshford
ALittleBitOfDarkness (Ruby_Red)
allGT4
andywar
Anti-Sora
Apocolypse_Cow
ArlanKels
Arkinum
arsenalgear4079
asianjoykiller
AstroJen
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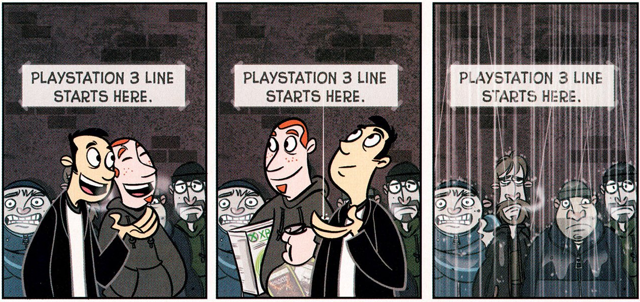
PENNY ARCADE

PS3 LAUNCH FUN


PLAYSTATION 3 LINE STARTS HERE.
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radiOPM

BEHIND THE SCENES AND BEYOND THE PAGES OF THE OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE

radiopm.1UP.com
As the saying goes all good things do come to an end. With the passing of OPM comes also the passing of radiOPM. In the final episode, the gang reminisces what deserves remininscing and thanks those who need to be thanked. Special appearances from OPM alums John Davison, Sam Kennedy and Mark MacDonald round out a truly special podcast. Bid a final goodbye at radiOPM.1UP.com.

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Hype

PREVIEWS AND NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF PLAYSTATION

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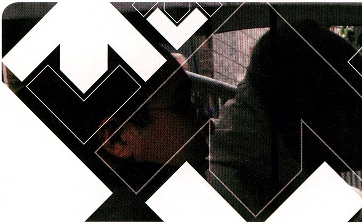


Behold, the sights and sounds of the PlayStation 3 launch in San Francisco!

1

2

1
Here he is! The man who was first in line to buy the PlayStation 3 at the Metreon in San Francisco...and one of the first to put it on eBay.

2
During the morning of the launch, the crowd was getting restless as shown by these two gentleman reenacting scenes from their favorite fighting game.

3
People were doing a variety of things to pass the time, such as play Nintendo DSs and PSPs, but mostly DSs.

4
Free food and coffee was provided to those in line, making the wait a little bit easier for everyone.

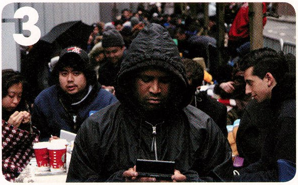
5
Some brought along all of the essentialls to brave the elements, including umbrellas and tents.

6
This guy is cool.

7
Sony Worldwide Entertainment president, Phil Harrison stood overlooking the crowd during the concert held just a few hours before launch.

8
This man won a golden ticket while waiting in line. This magical ticket scored him a free PS3 and the adulation of many.

9
There's no particular reason why this picture is here other then to illustrate the point that the line outside the Metreon looked like a refugee camp.



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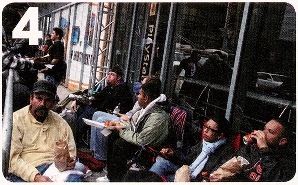

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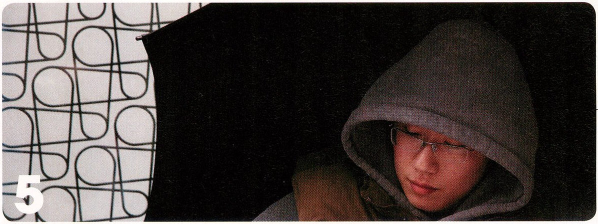

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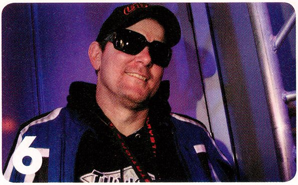

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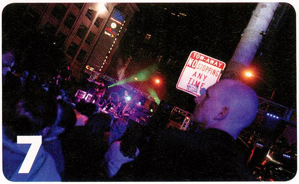

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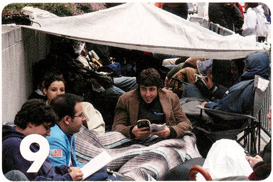

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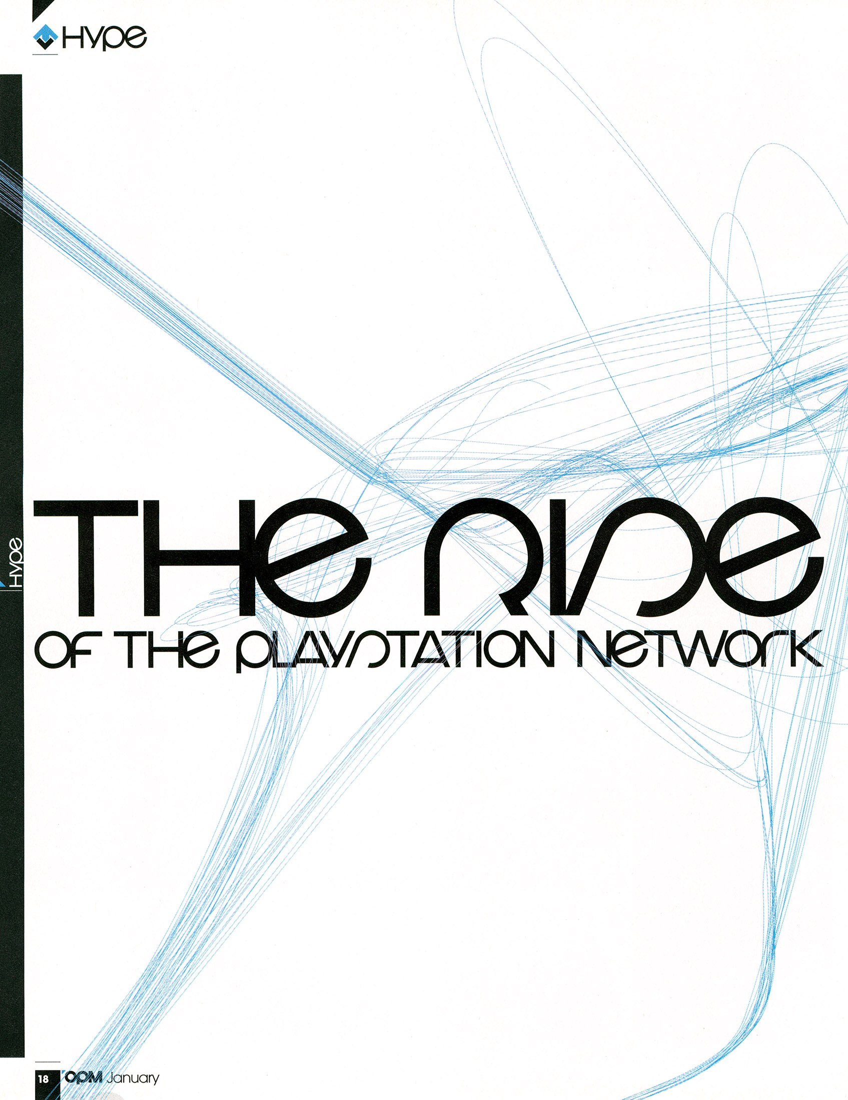

THE RISE
OF THE PLAYSTATION NETWORK

How online will change the way you play and pay

The days leading up to the PlayStation 3 launch were filled with many questions—the one most important being how was Sony going to compete with Xbox Live? It wasn't until literally weeks before the launch that Sony took the wraps off of one of the PlayStation Network's most important features, the PlayStation Store. "We knew that it would be important to sell digital content, including media such as movies and demos," says John Smedley, president of Sony Online Entertainment. "We wanted a service that handled content the way we thought it should be handled, so the fact that you can download stuff that you buy on five separate machines—it was all basically how we thought it should be."

That kind of "how we want it" attitude also applies to the pricing structure of content in the store with Sony announcing that just about everything found within the store would cost $14.99 or less, but Smedley is quick to point out that third parties, or any developer for that matter, won't be held to any particular price point within that range. "Even though we're Sony, Sony Online Entertainment is a third party and though Phil [Harrison, president of Sony Worldwide Entertainment] announced that content will be within that range, we could either go higher or lower [in terms of the price that Sony sets for its own games in that range]," he explains. "We look at the marketplace—we look at 360 games and Web-based games for pricing. It's looking at what the market will bear and I'd like to tell you that there's all this complex research that goes into it but it's as simple as this—we're all gamers. We all know what we're willing to pay for games."

Sony approached the online gaming component with a similar idea of making it accessible from every possible angle whether [you're] a person making games or a person playing games. "There's a master friends list on the PlayStation 3, and games can take advantage of it in different ways," Smedley says. "Some games may ignore it completely, but most will integrate it directly into the game, so if someone messages you, you can pause the game and talk to that person. There's also voice chat and video chat, so all of that is there. We also chose to use Xfire [for Untold Legends] to talk to people in-game. Sony's open system allows different services to be used on the PlayStation 3."

But the most integral feature of the PlayStation Network is the universal login. "You need to have it," says Smedley. "Nobody wants to keep typing [in a different login for everything]; it's just as simple as that." Of course, there are other key features as well, particularly the library feature, which lets you redownload games at any time. There are also plans to incorporate a feature that will let you purchase something online and then tell your PlayStation 3 to download that content, so that it will be ready to go by the time you start using your PlayStation 3. "It could happen in the future," Smedley says. "We could do it know if we wanted, but that's why the library concept is so powerful. It's designed to support that but whether or not they decide to support that remains to be seen."

In fact, the PlayStation Network has been designed to allow for quite a wide variety of features that simply aren't possible at the moment on competing services such as Xbox Live. "Sony doesn't have a 50MB Xbox Live Arcade limit. Sony's letting publishers do what they want," says Smedley. "We're making an MMO that won't be distributed at retail, and we believe so strongly in it that it will only be made available online. Some companies may choose to go this route for some games. It won't be the majority, but some will. It won't completely replace Blu-rays, but for some games it lends itself really well."

5 Questions with David Jaffe

THE FAMED SONY DEVELOPER LEADS THE PLAYSTATION NETWORK CHARGE

It's not HL. It's not *God of War 3*. It's not even a Blu-ray game. It's *Calling all Cars*, the latest game from the mind of David Jaffe, the creator and designer of the original *God of War*, and it's only available via download from the PlayStation Store. We spoke with Jaffe about his break from full-on console development to the creation of smaller games like *Calling All Cars* and what kind of impact they're going to have on the industry as a whole.

OPM In a previous interview, it seemed like you were getting burned out on games, but it seems like you're much more excited as of late. Do we have *Calling All Cars* to thank for that?

DAVID JAFFE *God of War* took a lot out of me, more than I thought it would. It took me a lot longer to fall in love with the idea of making games. I think what ended up happening was that, when I took over as creative director in Santa Monica, that job got so busy and I got so preoccupied with doing the job that I lost the time to play a lot of games and enjoy them as a game player. Over the last five or six months, I've started to make time. I've seen what's been coming out [for all of the platforms] and fallen in love with games again—that along with *Calling All Cars*, which is a game I've wanted to make for a long time because it's like the arcade games that I grew up with. As a creator, that's something else that has reenergized me.

OPM Does it seem ironic that you're developing this old-school arcade game for the most powerful console we've seen to date?

DJ There are two things to be aware of. The first is that we're actually putting a great deal of power into *Calling All Cars*. It's using the *Warhawk* engine. It's 60 frames per second, and splitscreen 1080p, so it's pushing the machine. The other thing is that, just because we've chosen an old-school direction to take, that doesn't mean the graphics don't look really sweet or that the animations aren't really cool. It's deceptive because it looks really old-school at first glance, almost like something you could do on the NES. But the visual quality and the effects in high-resolution could only be done on the current generation of hardware. As a designer, it's the kind of thing I've wanted to make. I know a lot of people get seduced by the amazing graphics of the PlayStation 3. That's not what keeps me up at night and that's not what gets me excited to come into work. It really doesn't matter how a game looks because if it isn't fun, it isn't important how good it looks because I'm bored.

OPM How are games like *Calling All Cars* going to change the industry?

DJ I would love to see, and this is a best-case scenario, these kinds of games and services become our version of Hollywood's independent film niche—games that aren't looking for mass budgets or audiences but they have a need or desire to be played. Hopefully, we'll be able to nurture and build audiences that are looking for cheaper games and quicker games to more innovative and interesting games. Businesswise, those games don't have a home in the retail channel that they should or could. We can now have the blockbuster movie version, which is the $60 Blu-ray game, and then we can have these smaller and sometimes more interesting games as well.

The worst case is that it ends up being shovelware and nobody really gives a s*** and that in two years there ends up being nothing [worthwhile] on any of the systems. I don't think that's what's going to happen when you look at the success of Xbox Live Arcade and Steam. This will be looked at as a major advancement in the way people play games and the types of games people play.

OPM Are these kinds of games going to bring in that larger audience that plays *Zuma* ad nauseam on the PC?

DJ I don't know about that. I don't know how many people who are *Zuma* fans that are going to run out and buy a PS3 in the first year or even in two years. I think there is a large percentage of hardcore gamers that will buy the PlayStation 3 in the first years that are not only interested in the 30- or 40-hour epics, but they're also interested in gameplay, whether it's a bigger game like *Resistance* or a smaller game like *Blast Factor* and *Calling All Cars*. Hardcore gamers just like good games.

OPM Will we eventually move toward a complete digital distribution model? How do you feel about downloadable content?

DJ There are a few categories. There's downloadable distribution of smaller, less expensive games and that's an amazing space for developers and gamers to play in. I don't know that I'm able to articulate how incredibly exciting it is as a gamer and a designer [who has] designed in the same vein as the classic arcade games. The concept of simple pick-up-and-play games on a console is one aspect that's going to continue to grow and be exciting. My goal is to have the games that we have in the PlayStation Store stand neck and neck with the big Blu-ray games for game of the year awards and fan adulation. I want the games to be just as compelling and successful.

As for full retail downloadable games, that is the future. There are very few people except for maybe EB or GameStop who would deny this, but even those guys are trying to get into the market with downloadable PC games. Whether we see that in the next year or next five years has to do with how long it takes to download a game and how much hard drive space you have, but it's absolutely on the way. Look at *Half-Life 2* on Steam—that was a successful first step. [Look at music.] It's such an antiquated idea to go into a store and buy a CD. Most people I talk to download their music.

The other thing, microtransactions—you have to be really careful. It can come off as greedy. You have to be smart in the design of it. You have to make sure that the business model [works]. For example, if they were to give away a bare-bones game and you can go in, like a buffet, and design your own game by picking and choosing the elements that you want—that doesn't bother me if the core game is cheap or free. From a design standpoint, we, as gamemakers, like to think we know best and that we know the best ingredients for making a great gameplay experience. The stuff that I don't like is the stuff that feels cheap—like having a gameplay advantage because you spent more money on content. That's really bad and it's really bad if you spent $50 on a game and the game companies are asking for more money for the complete experience.

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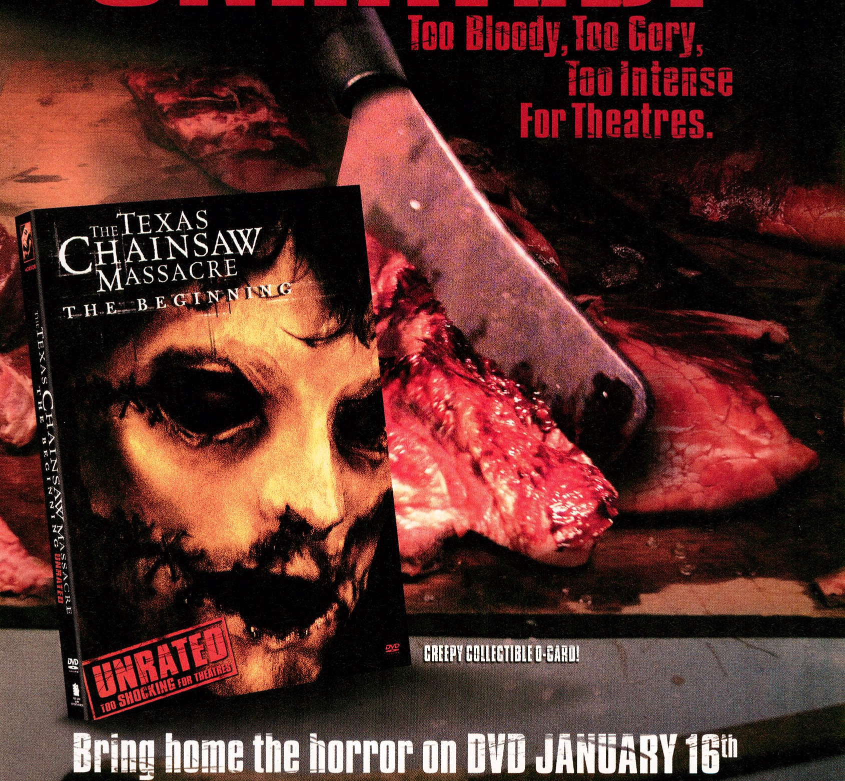

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Nate VanDyke

THE BIG PICTURE

RIP, PC

by John Scalzi

About a year ago, I wrote about my opinion that, among the many other things the PlayStation 3 was meant to be—a game machine, a Blu-ray DVD player (and market expander)—one of its other functions was to be a "stealth computer." That is, a fully functional PC in the shape of a gaming console. As most of you know by now, this is no longer opinion: The PS3 has its own Linux distro from computer company Terra Soft: Yellow Dog Linux 5.0.

What does this mean? Simply that most of the basic things you can do with a PC you should be able to do with your PS3. If you have your PS3 hooked up online, you'll be able to get on the Web with the Linux version of the Firefox browser and get your e-mail with the Thunderbird mail application. With Open Office, you'll be able to do word processing, spreadsheets, and other appallingly businesslike tasks. Terra Soft promises YDL 5.0 users will be able to use all sorts of preexisting programs built to run in Linux so, as practical matter, nearly everything you can do in Windows or Mac OS X you should be to do on your PS3... as long as you have a certain amount of tolerance for the homebrew wonkiness of the open-source computing world.

Should you care about this? Well, I think that depends on how geeky you are. I think true Linux geeks—the sort who have a penguin tattooed somewhere on their bodies—are going to be really interested in this; this is a way for them to get a closer look at the PS3 Cell architecture. But even nongeeks could find this an interesting environment; unlike Linux for the PS2, which was the realm of the true dorks, this Linux distro is meant to be used by normal humans, which is to say it's meant to look familiar to people who use Windows and OS X.

This is a way for true Linux geeks to get a closer look at the PS3 cell architecture.

It also means that some of the online activities people do on their computers can migrate to their TVs (or back to their TVs, for all those folks who spend hours watching *Colbert Report* clips on YouTube). Basically, you should care about this to the extent that it has the ability to consolidate your online activity. If all you want to do is play *Resistance: Fall of Man*, then it's no big whoop to you. For those of us who do lots of things online, it has the potential to be very big indeed.

Who should really care about this is Microsoft and PC manufacturers, particularly those who make lower-end home computers. Microsoft needs to worry because every minute a kid spends in the Linux environment on the PS3 is a minute they learn to live without Windows—and that's behavior that will make a difference when those kids buy dedicated computers and decide that rather than deal with Windows' security problems and price, they'll just install some version of Linux, the price of which ranges from free to cheap. Given Sony's competition with Microsoft in the games arena, I don't imagine Sony minds the possibility of substantially cutting into Microsoft's OS market share one bit.

For PC manufacturers, the issue is this: Most folks these days who have a game console probably also have a PC. But if the PS3 can perform all the basic functions of a PC—web browsing, chatting, e-mail—well, what do you need the PC for? The $600 PS3 is expensive game console but a dirt-cheap basic computer. The PS3 isn't a threat to the high range of the PC market, but if I were eMachines or Dell, I'd be worried about the PS3 eating away at the bottom of the PC market. I'd be really worried. |

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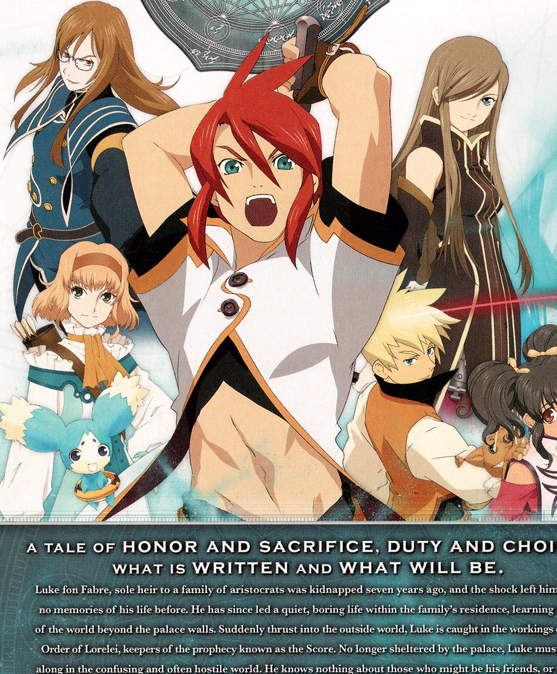

A TALE OF HONOR AND SACRIFICE, DUTY AND CHOICE, WHAT IS WRITTEN AND WHAT WILL BE.

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TEEN
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PlayStation®2

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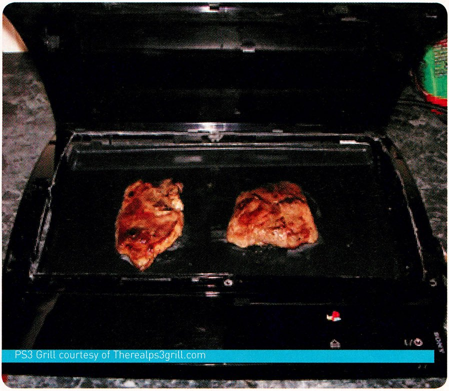
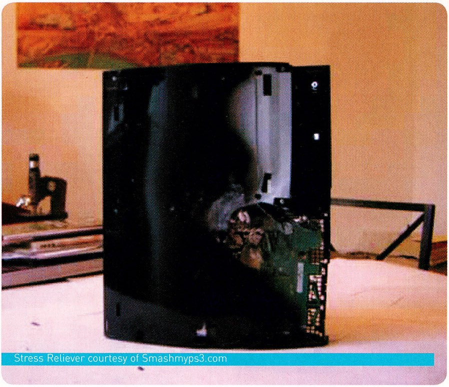
TRENDSPOTTER

Alternate uses for the PlayStation 3

We probably shouldn't be surprised that people are using their PS3s in ways that Sony never envisioned. Perhaps they didn't envision some of these ideas because no one thought that anyone who would go shell out $500 or $600 for a game console would turn around and essentially make it useless—oh, those crazy kids.



PS3 Grill courtesy of Therealps3grill.com



Stress Reliever courtesy of Smashmyps3.com

Playstation Bits

Byte-sized news

The PlayStation 3 brings people together! During the launch of the system on November 17th, there were several reports of violence, including pellet gun drive-bys and armed robberies. Guess people just want a PlayStation 3 that bad. In other news, eBay auctions of the system haven't been as out of control as originally was anticipated—some legit auctions had the system selling well over $2000. As of press time, most auctions have come down to the $1500 and below range. One of the games most people bought a PlayStation 3 for will be shown in the next few months. According to Phil Harrison, Sony's just about ready to take the wraps off of *Killzone* for the PS3 and finally put to rest the debate as to whether or not Guerrilla can achieve the visual quality in the target video shown at E3 2005. Finally, the site known as iSuppli disassembled a PS3 and priced the individual components. So how much does a PS3 really cost? $840.35! See, $600 isn't that bad!

Game Envy

Viva Piñata

We've talked about how we wish *Animal Crossing* were on a PlayStation system, and now that Microsoft has *Viva Piñata* (a sort of *AC* plus *Pokémon* plus *Sims* plus piñatas game), we're covering similar ground. *Viva Piñata*, more than *AC*, is the perfect kid-friendly game. Yes, it looks and feels like a kids' game, with the bright colors and "make your garden pretty and your piñatas happy" vibe. But once you accept the harsh reality of selling your beloved piñatas, or creating weird farms for sacrificial and capital gain, *VP* stops being a kids' game and becomes a game for both the 12- and 32-year-olds.

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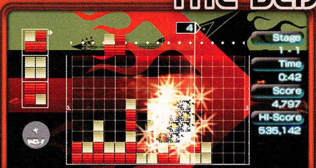

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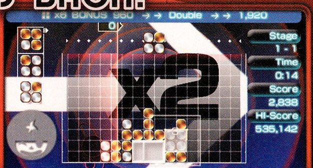

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Developer Atsushi Inaba in the Clover offices during the production of *Okami*.

JTOWN

ET TU, CAPCOM?

A few months back I did a tour of Clover Studio for *OPM* (and 1UP), which was a privilege few Western journalists—if any—have ever had. It's even more amazing to think that now, only a couple of months later, Clover Studio no longer exists. [*Funnily enough, neither will* OPM *after this issue! —Ed.*] Capcom apparently decided it wasn't efficient to support what was ostensibly an independent developer within the corporate campus based in Osaka, Japan. The quote from Capcom HQ stated that, "centralizing all the resources rather than running two companies" was in the better interest of the publisher. Of course, this "independent" developer was comprised of industry heavyweights like Atsushi Inaba, Hideki Kamiya, and Shinji Mikami, who were responsible for games like *Resident Evil, Steel Battalion, Viewtiful Joe, Devil May Cry, Okami,* and *God Hand* among them.

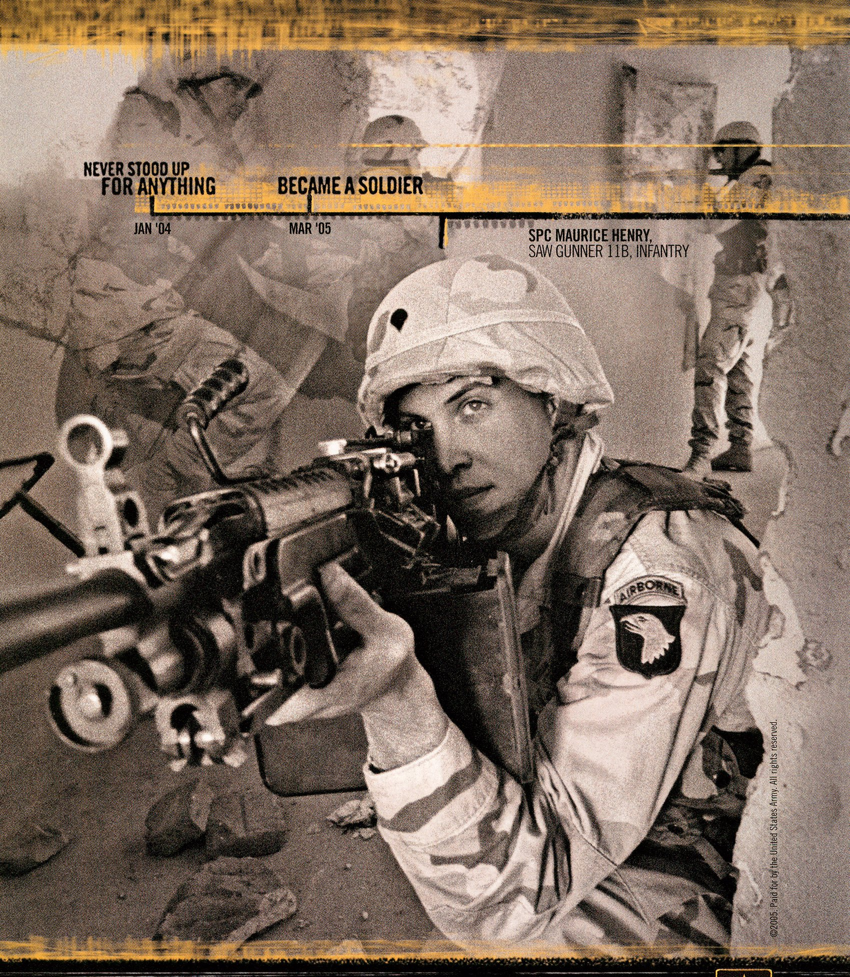
None of these gentlemen will have a hard time finding work (Mikami is already contracted to Capcom to work on some upcoming games), but it's interesting to think that, while I interviewed Inaba and Kamiya one hazy afternoon, these guys probably already knew they were on their way out. When I spoke with Inaba then, he wore a brave face, discussing the future of Clover Studio at length, stating that they'd like to rest somewhere between developers like Dream Factory, which put all its development eggs in one basket, and Q Entertainment, which takes on perhaps many small projects, but risks losing its identity in the process. "I'd rather stay in the middle where we don't have the risk of one game destroying the studio, but where we also retain our identity. This is just my personal stance," were his exact words, but I have to believe Inaba knew what was coming. After all, despite the critical acclaim and the marketing push, *Okami* was a notable failure in Japan, where it didn't make a dent in the sales charts. Only after extreme discounting has the game finally managed to break the 60,000 sales mark. For a system (the PS2) that tens of millions of Japanese people own, sales of anything under 100,000 are considered dismal. You can chalk that up to the conservative buying habits of Japanese gamers, who only buy sequels to *Final Fantasy* games, or licensed crap like the *Super Robot Wars* series, or manga-based games (*One Piece, Naruto*, et cetera), but, more importantly, it points to the lack of patience on the part of publishers these days.

Okami was a failure in Japan, where it didn't make a dent in the sales charts.

Like many sports teams, who usher in new coaches only to give them the broom at year's end when they've failed to win a championship, upstarts like Clover Studio are given a short time to prove their worth before they get the boot. The advent of these teams was supposed to signal a new era in innovation and game design, but at the end of the day they were roped back in, absorbed and assimilated. I understand that there's a bottom line in this competitive industry, but I think that the closing of Clover is lousy for the future of gaming, and bad for gamers in general. |

More MILKY

If you can't get enough of the inimitable James Mielke—and frankly, we're pretty sure you can't—head on over to milkman.1up.com to hear more about his zany adventures in Japan, his life as a model, and his musical tastes. Be sure to take special notice of his unbridled hate for San Francisco, as well.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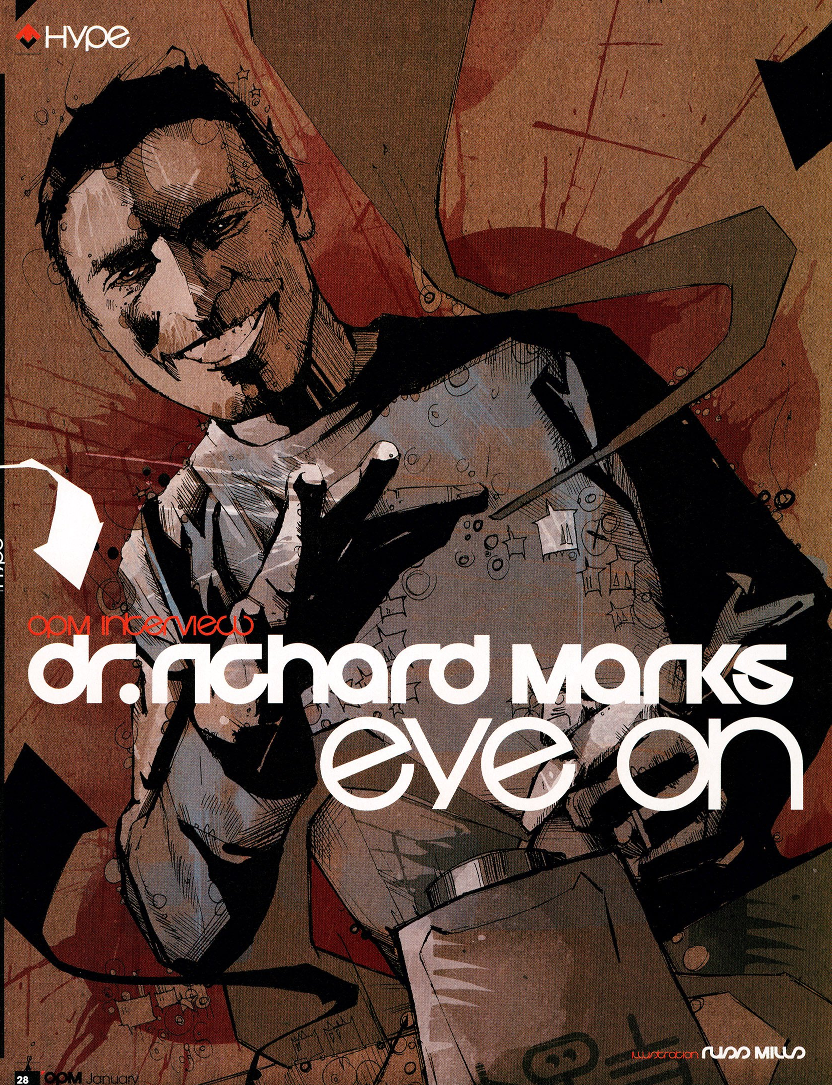
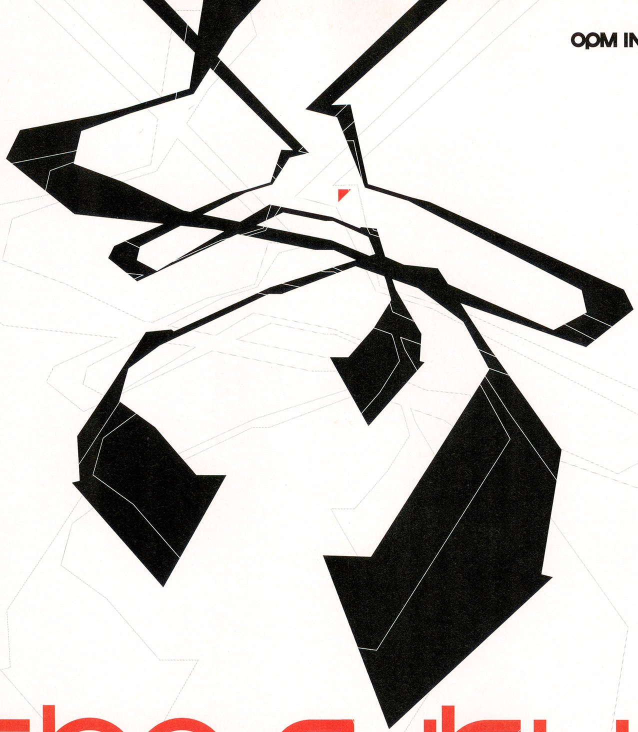


opm interview

dr. richard marks

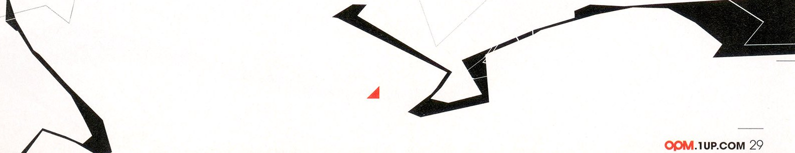
eye on

illustration russ mills



the future

While everyone seems to be focused on the miracles of motion-sensing controllers, the spotlight has been taken off of one of Sony's greatest innovations, the EyeToy. Now with the immense technological leap that the PlayStation 3 offers, EyeToy creator Dr. Richard Marks is looking to bring the camera peripheral back into the frame and push the technology further than it's ever been before.



OPM Why don't you start off by talking about your educational background?

Dr. Richard Marks My educational background—to go way back, in elementary school and high school, I took everything I could related to computers that my school offered. And then I went to college to be a computer scientist and found it kind of dry, actually, and switched majors to aerospace engineering and avionics, which was still using computers, but doing other things with them.

OPM And what exactly is avionics?

RM Avionics is like the electrical and control aspects of aircraft and spacecraft—guidance systems and things like that. And then, after I got my bachelor's degree, I didn't really want to enter the defense industry, which is what most people with that degree do—or they join NASA or something. I joined the space robotics lab at Stanford, but I ended up working in the underwater group, which was within the space group, so I worked on underwater robotics. The PhD thing is a lot like what we do here in the research lab. It's a lot of making up a question and then trying to answer it. A lot of the effort, really, is in making up the question, not the answer. Trying to figure out an interesting question is probably half the work.

OPM How did you jump from underwater robots to Sony? That's quite a leap.

RM I can connect the two, but only in hindsight. It's not like I did all those things so that I could someday work in the research lab at PlayStation—but in retrospect, it makes sense. All those things in robotics and avionics and aerospace, they're all kind of systems-engineering things, actually. And they all involve managing complexity and having lots of different kinds of things. People like that tend to be good at a lot of things but not super-expert in anything. And that's kind of how I am, and that's kind of how a lot of game developers actually are, too. You have to have a little bit of knowledge about a lot of different things to put it into the games. And so the way I actually went about it was I joined a start-up after I graduated doing camera tracking of people for videoconferencing. And before that, in school, I was doing it for underwater robots. Your specific question was how I got into this work—I saw the PlayStation 2 at a Game Developers Conference. I've always liked games, and I just went to the Game Developers Conference for fun. I went to the keynote and saw the PlayStation 2 unveiling, and I really was excited about it, and that's why I put my résumé in. But I've always been interested in games and wanted to work for a games company, but I didn't find a way to do it until then.

OPM So, since you had the experience with camera tracking, did you immediately start on EyeToy when you started with Sony?

RM When I saw the PlayStation 2 unveiled, the thing that struck me about it was how good it would be at doing things like that—tracking and processing video. I'm pretty sure most people in the audience weren't thinking about using it to do that. But that's what I thought: "Wow, that's probably a unique opportunity for me, because that's the way I would think about doing something with it. What would happen if I did plug a camera into it and tried to do things that way?" And so I presented that. Actually, Sony called me in—just to talk to me, I thought. They asked me, "What would you want to do if you were here?" I told them that was the kind of stuff I'd want to do. I didn't really know I was interviewing for a job, but it turned out I was. I thought they were just trying to talk to a local Stanford person or something.

> **"I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW I WAS INTERVIEWING FOR A JOB, BUT AS IT TURNED OUT, I WAS."**

OPM That's gotta be a nice surprise.

RM Yeah, well, it's weird, because I wasn't looking for a job, actually. I had a good job, but then I had to make a tough decision: "I have a good job, but I could go to a dream job." So I decided on the dream job.

OPM What do you do? What are your daily responsibilities?

RM I used to be a manager of a group called Special Projects, which was kind of a catchall term for "anything" or "nothing," depending. I enjoyed that because it gave me a lot of flexibility. The kind of people who were in the group, though, were physics-simulation people and user-interface people. So, really, that's mostly what we focused on. But we did do a little bit of graphics and a little bit of other things, too. But now I've moved into, again, a different kind of role than I had before, which is more into the research. Now I'm a senior researcher, so nobody reports to me anymore. But the thing that's good about my job is that my boss does empower me to do the kinds of things I want. If I had to do his job, I never be able to do anything that I do now. He empowers me to get other things done.

OPM Do you prefer being on the nitty-gritty side, more the hands-on, or do you prefer the management stuff that you were doing when you were still in Special Projects?

RM I prefer to be hands-on, personally. I think that it's more the mold that I was cut out of, I guess. And everyone always says that if you want to accomplish big things, eventually you have to involve more people and be in charge of them. I still try to involve more people, but I don't prefer to be in charge of them.

OPM So, as for what you did with the Special Projects stuff—our experience with you is primarily through EyeToy. Is there anything more than you did that you don't get credited for as often, or were you pretty much just focused on the EyeToy stuff?

RM Most of the EyeToy work was before the Special Projects group was formed. I was an individual researcher doing work with camera input, and then I went and worked with the guys in London [who] eventually productized the EyeToy. And then when I came back we formed the Special Projects group. At that time, our mission was to start doing specification work and simulation work for the PS3. So we started cutting our teeth on the things that were really bleeding-edge. There weren't even chips available; we were working with simulators. They were a thousand times real-time speed, and one-thousandth as fast as real-time speed, so it was really hard to work in that time. We had a small group of about six of us, and the end of all that, the most visible thing, was the demo we made at E3 2005, the duck demo with the water and the bathtub and the cups of water. So that was our group's final product. And the real goal of it was to try to act like a prototyping group that's going to go through the same things a game-development team would go through, but go through them as quickly as we could and try to find all the issues with it and try to feed back anything we learned to the game developers. So we presented our postmortem of it at the PlayStation developers conference.

OPM So you guys were like the canary in the mine?

RM Yeah, basically. That's right. And at first, our focus was only on the physics and interface side. But then, since Sony decided they wanted to show it at E3, we rapidly brought in as much graphics expertise as we could to up the level of graphics. The guys on the team, that's the thing I was most impressed about, because we didn't really have a "graphics group." But they learned as much as they could about graphics in a short time, and we found the right people who did know, who were experts, so that we could do all the refraction and reflection and caustics and things like that in the water.

Another thing that the Special Projects group—since we did get a lot of experience with the PlayStation 3 quickly, there was a lot of system software that needed to be made, so the math libraries and things on the PlayStation 3, we wrote some of those in our group. A little less glamorous, but very important.

OPM It seems like you're still sort of an ambassador for EyeToy; you were giving demos for *The Eye of Judgment* at E3, and so on. Are you still working with EyeToy as the senior researcher,

or have you moved into different areas?

RM I still think that a camera is a great input device. I've tried to broaden my scope a little bit and not just be the "camera guy," but it still is kind of my passion. That's one of the best interfaces, or most interesting interfaces, that we can still do new things with that we haven't done yet. When I first got here, all I did was generate zillions of minidemos that would show all the different things you could do with the camera, and the London group eventually picked up on some of them and productized them. But we've touched a tiny percentage of all the things that could be done. They picked the ones that were the most robust and reliable and fun that they could come up with, but I think there are still a bunch waiting in the wings to do.

OPM Why do you think those things haven't really been picked up? When the EyeToy came out, everyone was talking about the different things that you could do with it, and it seems now that the only way it's being used is mapping your face onto characters with the Cameo system.

RM Well, there are a couple of things, I think. The first thing is [that] the EyeToy, in some estimation, is vastly successful. But in another estimation, only 10 percent of the people out there have one that have PS2s. So if you're going to make a game, if you make it all about EyeToy, you're reducing your market tenfold. It might be a more captive market, but still, it's a business decision for some people that they say, "We'll add optional EyeToy support with the face-mapping, but we're not going to build a game around it yet." So that's one reason, I think. Another reason is that some of the things we do, we can do in a lab really well, but it's hard to do in an unknown home with somebody who doesn't know anything about cameras. They just want to turn it on and have it work. The London guys did a good job of making that pretty easy for what they've done for people to do, but some of the other demonstrations I've made involve a little bit more good lighting in the room. And it's hard to explain to somebody what "good lighting" is and things like that. So I think it's almost my side of the job to come up with metrics so that I can explain to the product people, "This is the way we can get people to do these new things that involve a little bit more restriction." So I think you'll see some of that. The other thing is the camera itself. We made a very low-cost camera for people so that it could be mass-produced, but then it restricts the quality level you can achieve at that price point. Cameras have gotten a whole order of magnitude better since then. So if we made a camera now, it would be so much better than the one then, for the same price. So we can do a whole lot more new things that way. That's why I'm excited about that.

OPM At the Tokyo Game Show when they were showing *The Eye of Judgment*, they were showing this miniaturized EyeToy. Was that just a prototype?

RM Yeah, we have a prototype camera that we're not really discussing the specs on just yet, but *The Eye of Judgment* uses that camera. We'll talk more about it after the launch of the PS3.

OPM Do you think that the power of the next-gen systems will allow you to do more amazing things with the EyeToy?

RM Yeah, totally. The next-gen system makes what we can do with the camera input completely different. The previous generation had a lot of horsepower to do things—we ended up using a lot of the system power if we were going to process all that video. Now it's a small percentage of the system power to do the things that it took all of the PS2 to do. Now we can do that as a tiny background task on the PS3. And if we decide to devote a lot of the PS3, we can do completely new things that we couldn't even touch upon before with the PS2. For example, labeling of the parts of your body, knowing where your head is, even which direction you're looking in, those kinds of things that we could never do on the PS2. Also, the resolution of the camera is higher. So we can handle a bigger image, basically. There are just a lot of concepts to get enabled when you can just do a few new technological things, and we'll definitely be able to do those. Can't talk about more, because the PS3 coming out is a big, huge, exciting thing for us, and I don't want to mix the message too much.

OPM This is kind of an interesting thing now that with the PS3 and the Wii as well having these motion-sensing controllers. Do you think that enhances the power of the EyeToy, or does it overlap too much? Does it take away from the EyeToy experience?

"ONLY 10 PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE THAT HAVE A PS2 HAVE AN EYETOY."

RM I'm really excited about the Wii and about our motion-sensing controller input stuff. I think it's going to make for a lot of new experiences. I don't think that it detracts from the EyeToy in any way. Actually, I feel in some ways, it kind of is sending the signal that it was a good thing to have done the EyeToy. People want more variation in the way they input data into the system. I don't think they think about it as "inputting data," but that's how I think of it. [Laughs]

And I think, for me—I'm very biased, of course—but to me, when you change the interface, it completely changes everything. At home, I have three kids, and we have all sorts of games. My son just turned 7 last night, actually, and the present we gave him is just like the game Simon, if you remember that, except it's a wobble-board. You stand on it and lean in the direction you want to pick the color. There's no new gameplay, except that it's a completely different game, because you're leaning. I think that's amazing—just that one change completely changed the whole game to me, yet it's still the same code, almost, inside the chip that's doing the processing. It's just that the interface has changed. For me, the interface is huge. With the EyeToy, one of the limits we had before was the cord on the controller; you didn't really want people jumping around and holding a corded controller. So removing the cord is a great thing; we'll have a cordless controller that you can jump around with and do other input with. The fact that we know your motion from the fact that you're jumping around and now through the motion input. Those kinds of things are going to be exciting to do mixed things with. Also, I think with the motion-controller stuff, a lot of the obvious things will happen first. And they'll be very fun—flying aircraft with it or navigation by tilting the controller, but I think there will be some more subtle things that people haven't really thought about before that'll get done. And that's what I think will really be exciting to me, is when some game that you couldn't really do before is done because you have the motion input.

OPM Do you think the capability now for developers to create these smaller games and market them and distribute them digitally, do you think that affects the way that people think about games from the development side, that same way you were talking about with rethinking the interface?

RM I definitely think it does. We've had a lot of conversations around here about it, in fact. Sometimes there's an idea, but it's hard to think of a two-year development project and a huge effort being put around it. But the idea's still a good idea that you would love people to be able to try and play; having this easier distribution mechanism for a smaller piece of content, I think that's great to be able to have new ideas happen that way. Also, you can use it almost as a way to try out an idea. You might build a single level around something and put it out there, and if it gets huge acceptance by the consumers, then you make more. You realize that's what people want. I think you've seen a little bit of that happening in other places, where some of the things people put out there are not very well received, but some of them get great acclaim. You know you've done something right. If you have to wait two years till the development cycle's over for that, it's too long. So I think you will see a lot more innovation happening because of this.

pause

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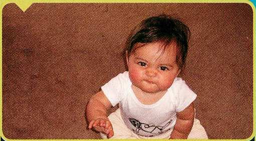

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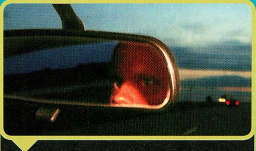
2. Make noises.
3. Watch small child try and imitate said noises.
4. Don't think about the fact that you're so hard up for entertainment that you're making noises at a baby who's probably making fun of how ridiculous you look.



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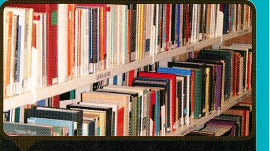

Libraries

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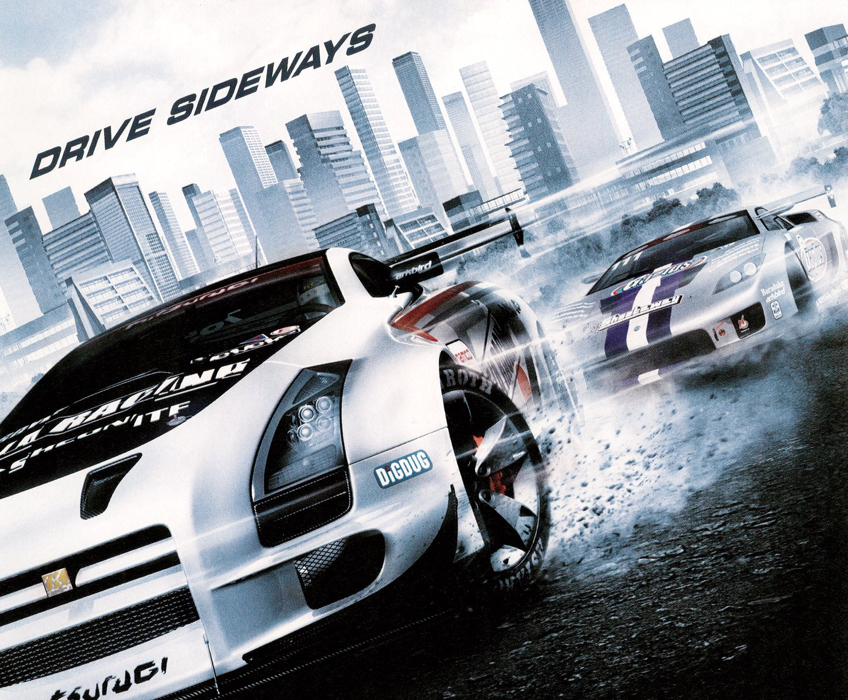

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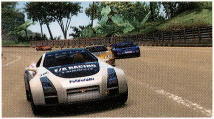
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PLAYSTATION 3

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January 2007

it's that time of the month!

MONDAY

1 Happy 2007! Oblivion for the PS3 is supposed to be available today–what a nice way to ring in the new year.
8 National Clean Off Your Desk Day. The OPM staff celebrated this on November 30, 2006.
15 Martin Luther King Day. Honor this man. College Hoops 2K7 appears on stores shelves.
29 Yippee! It's former OPM Editor-in-Chief Tom Byron's birthday today. Maybe he'll take the day off from work. Er, check that.

TUESDAY

2 Celebrate Science Fiction Day (honoring the birth of Isaac Asimov) by singing along with Karaoke Revolution Presents American Idol for the PS2.
9 Two PS2 games! Arthur and the Invisibles (the demo is on this month's disc) and Backyard Basketball 2007.
30 Level 5's Rogue Galaxy ships for the PS2. Yay, we can't wait to play as Luke Skywalker again.

WEDNESDAY

3 National Write to Congress Day, a perfect time to remind our political leaders that issues like Iraq and the national economy are more important than legislation against videogames. For a pinch of irony, pick up The Warriors and Pimp My Ride for the PSP.
17 Judgment Day. Yep, that's today.

THURSDAY

11 The February issue of OPM would have appeared on newsstands this week. The cover was GTA4, Halo 3 and God of War 3, all for the PS3. At least that's what we had planned.
18 No games shipping this week. Just be happy you survived Judgment Day.

FRIDAY

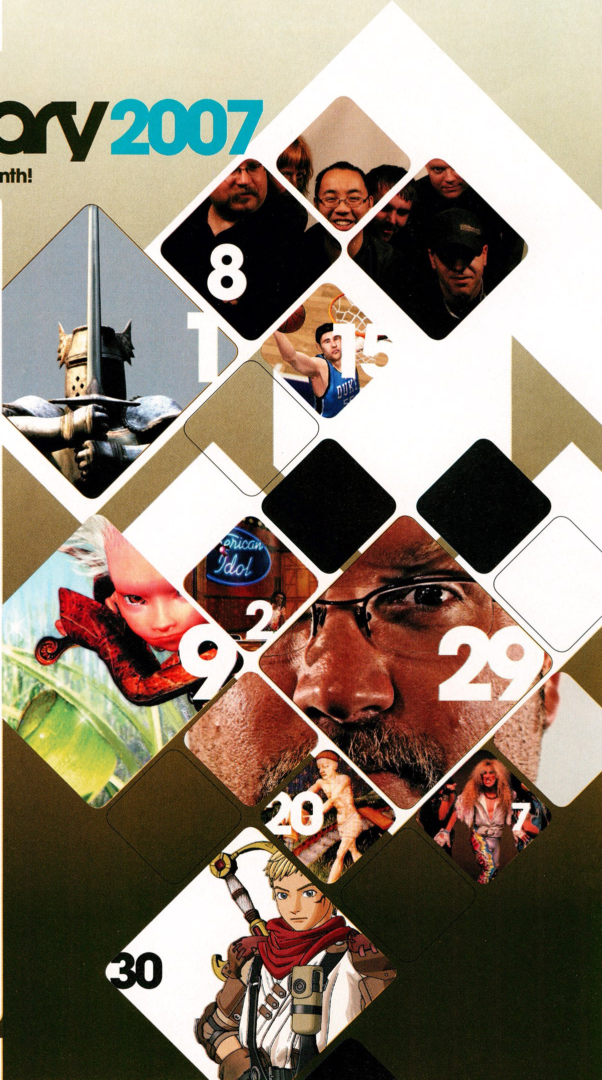
12 Alpha Dog and Arthur and the Invisibles come to a theater near you.
19 Janis Joplin born this day in 1943.

SATURDAY

6 It's Bean Day! As in "bean nice knowing all our awesome readers!"
20 Born this day? You're an Aquarius. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

SUNDAY

7 Join us as we celebrate Not Going to Take It Anymore Day, um, starting now.



Nantuko Husk
Serra Angel
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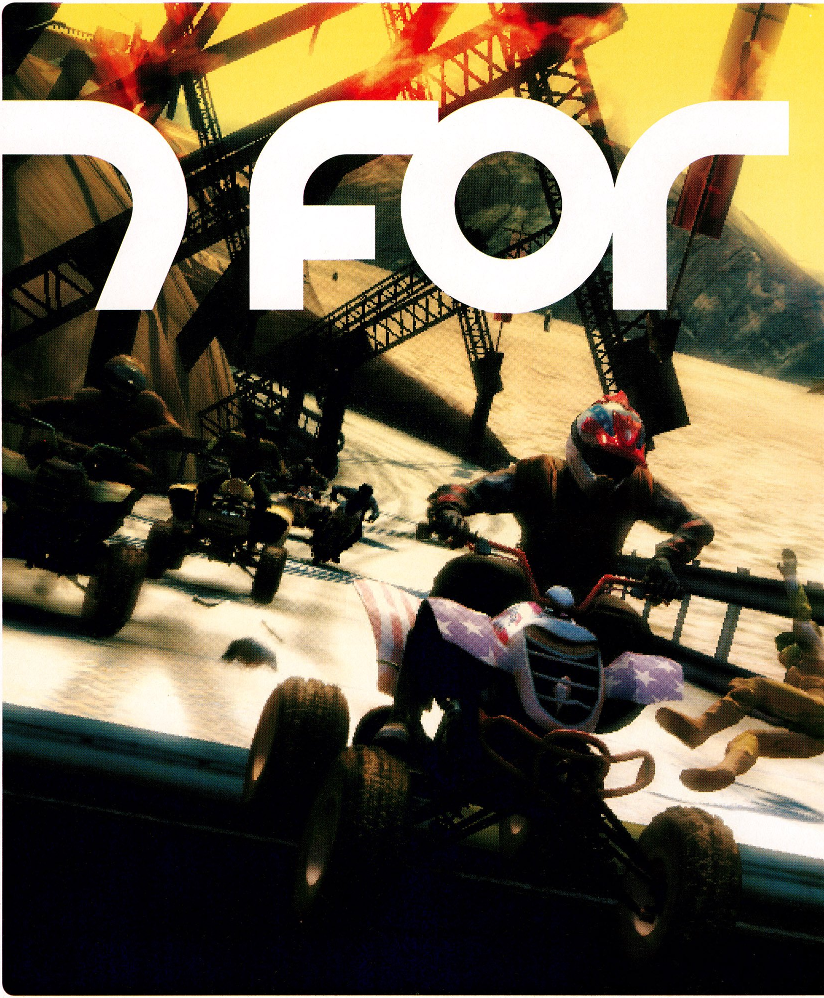
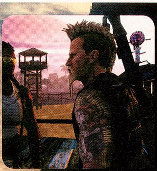
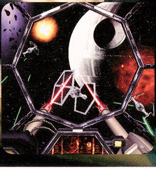


So the PS3 has officially arrived and turned "next-gen" into "current gen", but what now? What's there to do besides play another round of *Ridge Racer* or *Resistance*? Well, now that the launch window has simmered down, what's there to look forward to? To answer your question, we picked the next big games for 2007–four fresh new ideas and three new sequels. We're not saying these are the best games of 2007, but these look like the most significant titles to hit the PS3 in the next few months (well, at least for six of these games, as *MGS4* is probably a late bloomer). And if you didn't snag a PS3 during the launch day craziness, don't worry, we picked out seven past-gen (i.e. PS2 and PSP) games to keep you occupied until you can grab the Sony behemoth.





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WILD LORE
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THROW AXE
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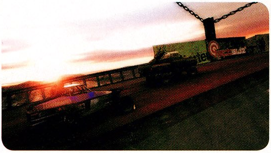
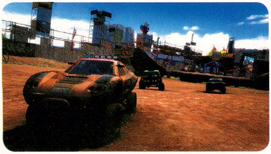
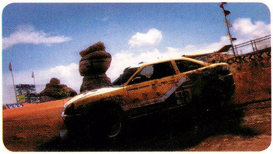
| pub. Sony CEA dev. Evolution Studios release February

Motorstorm



MotorStorm leads the wave of fresh new ideas hitting your PS3



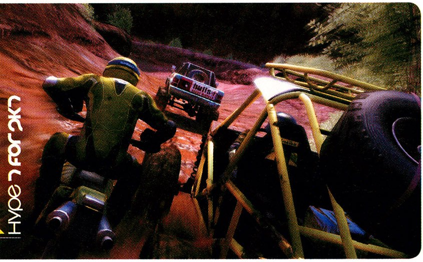


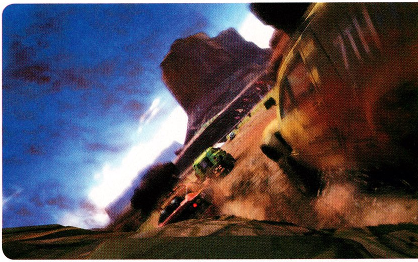
Sony Worldwide Studios head Phil Harrison, the "big software guy" at the company, believes in *MotorStorm*. First shown in E3 2005, *MotorStorm* quietly disappeared, only to get a lot of buzz at Tokyo Game Show 2006 once gamers and press got to actually play it. Even with just one track and two drivable vehicles (the racing truck and the bike), *MotorStorm* was able to elicit comparisons to *WaveRace* and *SSX*—other non-traditional system launch-window titles that combined visuals, physics, and quirky non-car racing into revered franchises.

When we asked developer Evolution Studios what *MotorStorm* does on the PS3 that wouldn't be possible on the PS2, lead designer Nigel Kershaw immediately replies, "It's got to be the level of filth in the game. Last generation was all about shininess, chrome and neon. We really wanted to differentiate ourselves from all that 'bling' and no one has really attempted the level of grime seen in *MotorStorm*, simply because the hardware wasn't up to it." We'll allow that, but after some playtime with both the PS3 launch demo (the one you can download from the PlayStation Store) and the complete Japanese build (has everything except multiplayer, which will be in the European and US versions), we'd also add "crazy physics and AI" to the list of things that *MotorStorm* needed the PS3 for.

MotorStorm's basic structure centers around a fictional off-road racing event known simply as "The Festival" in Monument Valley (Kershaw elaborates that, "Many, many locations were considered, from the highlands of Scotland to the Siberian wilderness and pretty much everything else in between. We settled on Monument Valley because it's just so iconic."). The Festival is divided up into 21 tickets, with each ticket representing three-to-four races within. Getting third place or higher in a race earns points, and there is usually a point minimum before unlocking another ticket.

Kershaw explains further, "With *MotorStorm*, we're doing something very different; we have multiple vehicle types all racing together and as a result we had a lot more to consider than a standard single-class racing game. For that reason, we introduced the 'ticketed events' approach, this allows us greater control over the challenges we present to the player, and I think it gives each race a much more unique feel. We approached the races in *MotorStorm* a bit like you would a puzzle: 'How do I win this race, with this vehicle, on these surfaces, against this opposition?' We wanted to keep it tightly focused, and offer a very distinct sense of progression. Also, the stages would not look anywhere near as visually stunning if we had to consider all the compromises involved in having them all in one world. [Finally] everyone will find the vehicles they're comfortable with, but





with the ticket system we throw them a curveball every now and again to take them out of their comfort zone."

Once an event (some with humorous names like "Massive Damage" and "Giant Enemy Crab") is chosen, then it's on to selecting the vehicle. Each vehicle class initially starts with two to three vehicles, with a handful of paint jobs per vehicle. Sony CEA San Diego Director of Production Jim Molinets points out that after release, Sony plans to make new paint jobs and tracks as regular, downloadable additions to *MotorStorm*. After choosing a vehicle, gameplay itself is pretty simple: navigate the course (R trigger is gas, L trigger is brake/reverse, and X is boost) and beat the competition. Boost is a quick way to gain speed, but it also raises temperature—which makes your vehicle blow up if you're in the red for too long. At higher level races, where the AI is ruthless in its racing, success means you have to start using the boost smartly to get through the course rapidly (Molinets himself is known to use the handbrake to drift into tight turns and then boost instantly to make up the lost ground.

Designer Jed Ashforth elaborates on the player-centric AI: "Generally the AI in your run-of-the-mill racing games is there to do one thing: beat the player. With *MotorStorm* we wanted the AI to be there to entertain the player as well as be competitive. Think of it this way: regular racing games try to simulate a real race, whereas our approach was to simulate a Hollywood script of a race; bigger, louder and with plenty of action to keep you entertained." In a live run-through of the game, I noticed the AI exhibiting two unique acts not seen in other racing games: deeply-held grudges and a sense of fear. Grudges, in that other racers will remember things you do to them, and act accordingly. Cut off a car too many times, and he'll weave his way around other racers to smack you. Sometimes, this hatred overrides their judgment; sometimes the AI will sacrifice a winning position just to mess with you. On the flipside, the AI knows when it can't win a fight. One time, while driving a big rig, I pulled up behind three bikers—jamming on the Square button results in a massive blaring of my horn, and afterwards, I noticed the bikers turn their heads, see me, and then scattered to get out of my way. Other subtle touches include bikers and ATV riders demonstrating rude gestures with their fingers as reactions to being overtaken, or female riders sashaying their derrieres to mock you when they zoom past you.

EVENTS WITH FUNNY NAMES LIKE "MASSIVE DAMAGE"

Another aspect of the AI is tied to the track design itself: the AI knows how to effectively use the vehicle it's driving. One gameplay tactic is to watch where the AI drives. Knowing the terrain and vehicle type, the AI finds appropriate routes that you can also exploit (for example, seeing bikes veer off to a tiny crevice, or seeing large big rig tracks in a pit). The fact that the AI is mindful of its ride makes Ashforth conclude, "In terms of technical criteria, the hardest part of track design is making sure there are routes that play to the strengths of every vehicle. Balancing has been a real headache, but we knew this from the start."

It wouldn't sound like it, but indeed, *MotorStorm* ultimately centers on filth. How the filth gets kicked up onto your paint and gets caked on, how your tires react to treading through said filth, and how the other drivers and riders react to the filth and how they try to use filth against you. It remains whether players will indeed consider *MotorStorm* a flagship title like Harrison said it is, but until then, we can all agree that *MotorStorm* is the filthiest game on the PS3.

online

Lead Deeigner Kershaw says, "The sky's the limit with online play. We really want to give players the freedom to experiment with combinations of vehicles and tracks. That's part of the differentiator between online and offline play. With offline we're presenting the player with a series of challenges for them to overcome. Whereas online is more about "OK, now you've seen the game the way we intended it, how would you like to stick 15 big rigs in The Grizzly?'. It's about adding depth to the game without making it a separate experience."

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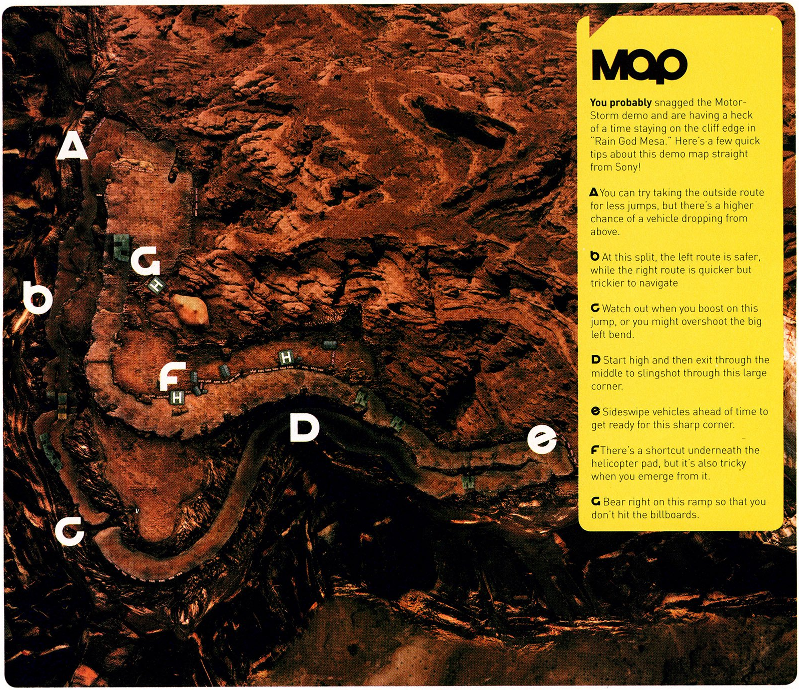


Map

You probably snagged the MotorStorm demo and are having a heck of a time staying on the cliff edge in "Rain God Mesa." Here's a few quick tips about this demo map straight from Sony!

A You can try taking the outside route for less jumps, but there's a higher chance of a vehicle dropping from above.

b At this split, the left route is safer, while the right route is quicker but trickier to navigate

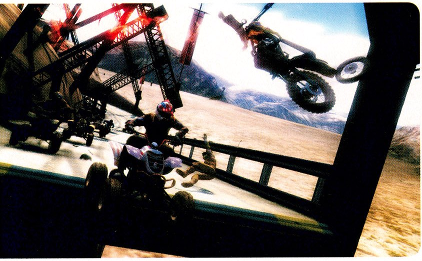
C Watch out when you boost on this jump, or you might overshoot the big left bend.

D Start high and then exit through the middle to slingshot through this large corner.

e Sideswipe vehicles ahead of time to get ready for this sharp corner.

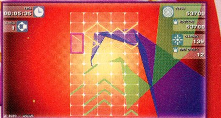
F There's a shortcut underneath the helicopter pad, but it's also tricky when you emerge from it.

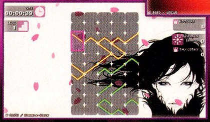
G Bear right on this ramp so that you don't hit the billboards.



GENIUS LOVES COMPANY!

"...both games are unique in style and play, you might even want to pick both up."
– IGN





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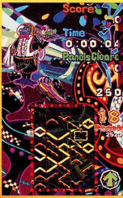
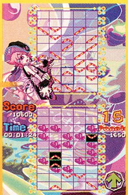


"...Gunpey is a blast to play..."
– GameSpot



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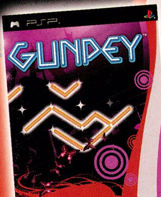

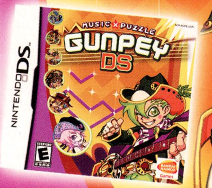

PRODUCTS RANGE FROM EVERYONE TO EVERYONE 10+
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Crude Humor

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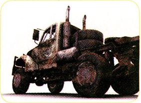
VEHICLES



ATV

Think of this, gameplay-wise, as a cross between the bike and a buggy. It has the maneuverability of the bike with the multi-terrain capability of the buggy, plus, like the bike, the rider can punch a nearby rider with the Square button.

big rig

The good news: they're big and heavy. That means that they can pretty much barrel through any obstacle (while every other vehicle would have to weave around) on most any terrain. The bad news: they're big and heavy, so they are so...very...slow.

buggy

A good off-road vehicle that excels at zipping around the sand and other non-traditional surfaces. The fact that buggies are mostly frames and wheels and not much else translates into a crazy suspension system that makes for very bouncy rides, especially in first person view.

Motorbike

The most maneuverable (a lot of members in the development team favor the bike because of this), but also the most fragile of the vehicles. Bikes impart a good sense of speed, and can navigate most of the tough terrain in The Festival, but a good tap from any of the other vehicles could result in a crazy crash.

Mud plugger

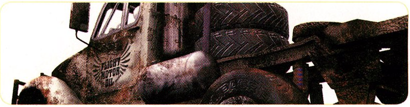
A lot like the truck, but more suited to navigate harsh mud. While other vehicles will spin and swivel around in the mud helplessly, the mud plugger, well, plugs onward.

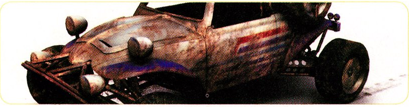
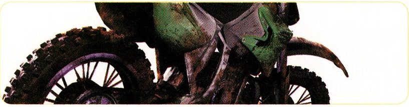
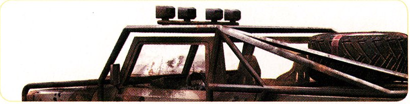
racing truck

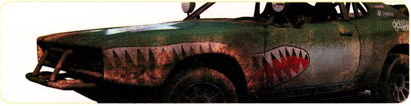
A sort of compromise between the big rigs and the rest of the lineup. The truck is hefty enough to smack most of the other vehicles, can handle a good number of the other terrain types, and is more maneuverable than the big rig.

rally car

The closest to a classic racing vehicle. The rally car is, by far, the fastest vehicle in the lineup (making this another developer favorite), and one of the most maneuverable. But the rally car has trouble with rough terrain.





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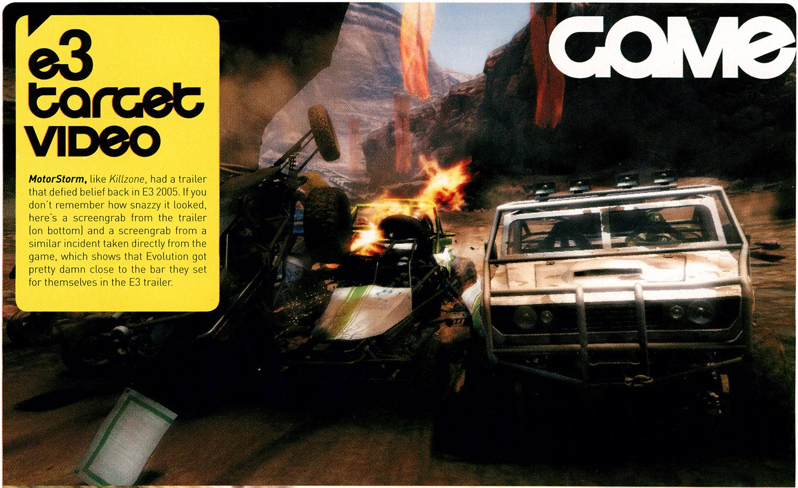
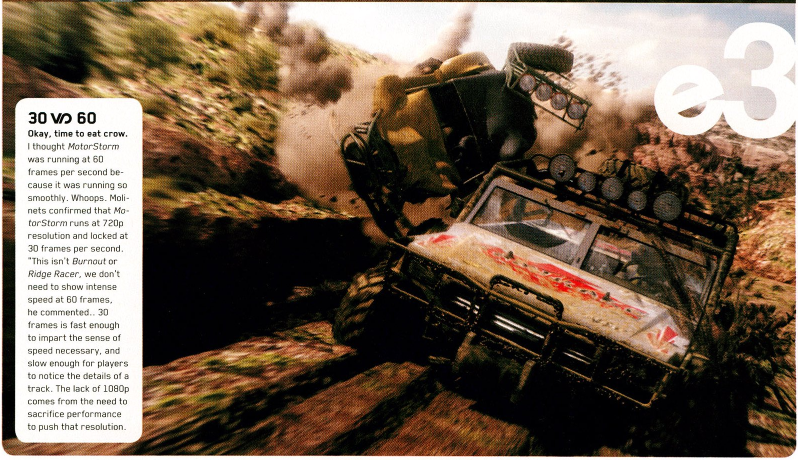


e3 target video

MotorStorm, like *Killzone*, had a trailer that defied belief back in E3 2005. If you don't remember how snazzy it looked, here's a screengrab from the trailer (on bottom) and a screengrab from a similar incident taken directly from the game, which shows that Evolution got pretty damn close to the bar they set for themselves in the E3 trailer.



30 vs 60

Okay, time to eat crow. I thought *MotorStorm* was running at 60 frames per second because it was running so smoothly. Whoops. Molinets confirmed that *MotorStorm* runs at 720p resolution and locked at 30 frames per second. "This isn't *Burnout* or *Ridge Racer*, we don't need to show intense speed at 60 frames, he commented.. 30 frames is fast enough to impart the sense of speed necessary, and slow enough for players to notice the details of a track. The lack of 1080p comes from the need to sacrifice performance to push that resolution.

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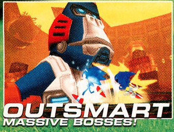
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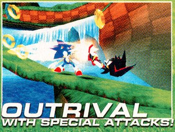
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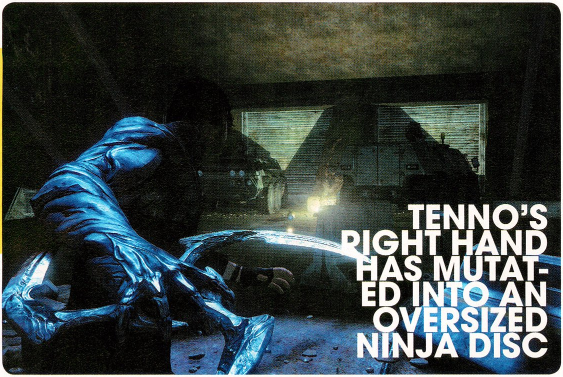
| pub. D3 Publisher of America dev Digital Extremes release Fall 2007

dark

The last time we saw Tenno, he had on some sort of goofy future helmet on.

SECTOR

Hayden Scissorhands



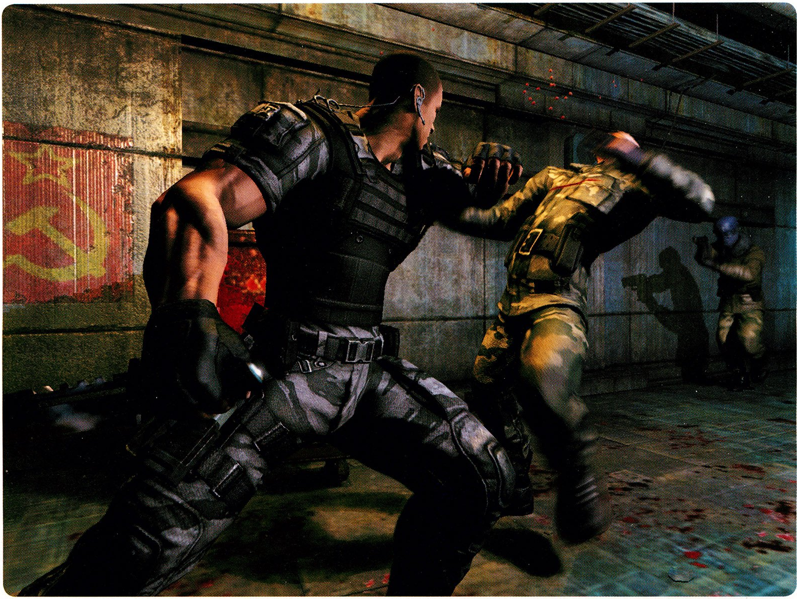
TENNO'S RIGHT HAND HAS MUTATED INTO AN OVERSIZED NINJA DISC

WHOSE IDEA IS THIS?
Originally announced in 2004 as the first (albeit unspecified) next-generation game in development, *Dark Sector* is an original creation of Digital Extremes, the London, Ontario-based developer that debuted with *Epic Pinball*. Digital Extreme's résumé includes the groundbreaking FPS *Unreal* (codeveloped with Epic), the *Unreal Tournament* spin-off franchise, and *Pariah*. You could say that Digital Extremes has first-hand knowledge of first-person gaming.

WHAT'S THE IDEA?
Despite its impressive track record, Digital Extremes is breaking from its award-winning formula by creating *Dark Sector* as a third-person shooter, relying on the Unreal Engine to drive the game mechanics. In the game, you'll play as Hayden Tenno, an operative born without the ability to feel pain (a real-world defect known as congenital insensitivity to pain or congenital analgia), who is sent on an assassination mission. Tenno's body has been mysteriously (even to him) infected with a parasite that mutates his right hand into a sort of oversized ninja-disc blade (called a Glaive), and so the simple government agent has been imbued with superhuman abilities, which Digital Extremes calls "Evolution powers." There are reportedly three types of Evolution powers that we're betting change over time. Digital Extremes views Tenno as a sort of superhero, but of the ambiguous and brutal variety—think more Punisher or Wolverine than Captain America.

Dark Sector's fictional setting is the crumbling former Soviet nation of Lasria in the near future where biowarfare is the rule, not the exception. With his Glaive, Tenno winds his no-HUD way through bombed-out streets, using his blade-hand for surgically precise close-up and range attacks. Because the Glaive is actually a physical part of Tenno, it works like a boomerang, returning to him after an oftentimes bloody head-removal. If the Glaive is separated or damaged, Tenno can reform it. The Glaive can also take on properties of certain power sources in which it comes into contact. For instance, he'll take a shot at a light, smash the bulb, and then hit it again, causing the Glaive to fizz blue, like a tesla coil, and resulting in a more powerful weapon that causes wider damage. Similarly, he can throw the Glaive at fire, causing it to burst into flames. Remember, Tenno doesn't feel any pain, and a specially built skin-like armor prevents damage. While the power elements cannot be combined, the Glaive can also be used as a sort of tractor beam to grab far-away objects, such as a light source, and the Glaive can also be combined with conventional weapons, a grenade for instance.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?
Dark Sector is coming from a fairly reliable developer and it's been in development for about three years, so we expect the game's going to be good. It also looks fantastic, as all PS3 games should, and with DE's vast experience in online, we suspect it will be one of the first PS3 games to really shine in the multiplayer arena.



| pub. TBA dev. Edge of Reality release 2007

Cipher Complex

From jumping hedges to stabbing snakes

WHO'S IDEA IS THIS?
Balls. Big, enormous, gargantuan granite boulders—Edge of Reality, an Austin-based independent developer, must have a pair the size of Texas. How else could a team best known for ports and licensed games hope to take on the likes of *Metal Gear Solid* and *Splinter Cell*? Their PS3-bound stealth contender, *Cipher Complex*, has been funded in part by the profits the company made from games like *Over the Hedge* and *Shark Tale*. Are they f***ing crazy? "It's not like we're a studio of bumbling idiots who've never made a game before," says Thomas Coles, creative director for *Cipher Complex*. The EOR team has been biding its time, saving up cash for a one-time, risk-it-all go at an ambitious, original game.

WHAT'S THE IDEA?
After looking into several ideas, they stumbled onto one they thought worthy: "We found a hole in the stealth genre," says Coles. "Stealth games are pretty much hide-and-seek. What we really wanted was something fast-paced and brutal. In a nutshell, a stealth game for action gamers."

How do you speed up the cautious pace of a sneak-around stealth game? By slowing down everyone but the player. *Cipher Complex* implements a slick time-slowed dash that allows Agent Cipher, the game's Montana-born badass, to fly around the room at the speed of a bullet, too quickly to see. Though limited by an "adrenaline meter," the dash move gives players the freedom to be bolder than stealth games have traditionally allowed. If you get spotted coming around a corner, the dash is a quick save, allowing you to reach cover quickly and avoid detection. And when you just need to kill every unlucky bastard in the room, the dash is perfect for closing the gap between predator and prey.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?
When Agent Cipher does close said gap, *Cipher Complex* looks like an entirely different kind of game, more *Ninja Gaiden* than *Metal Gear*. With brawler combat complementing stealth gameplay, this might be the game that finally unites slow-and-steady stealthers with fast-and-twitchy actioners. Finally, while going toe-to-toe with Sam and Snake is a good way to get your ass whupped, these Texas underdogs are carrying a big stick.

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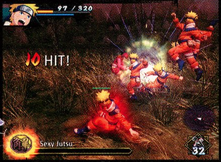
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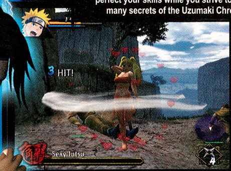
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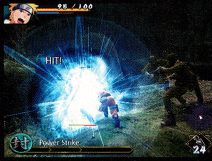
A ninja must be cunning as well as fast and powerful. Customize Naruto's strength, stamina, special attacks and more to create new abilities that will give you the edge in battle.


95 / 100
HIT!
Power Strike
24

THERE COMES A TIME WHEN EVERY STUDENT HAS TO FACE HIS TRUE DESTINY... AND ONE NINJA'S DESTINY MAY BE THE VILLAGE'S ONLY HOPE.

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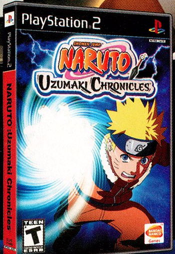
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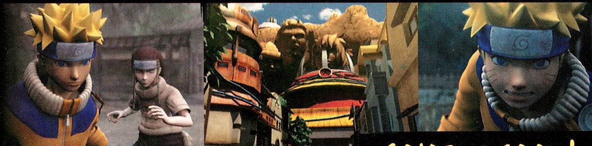

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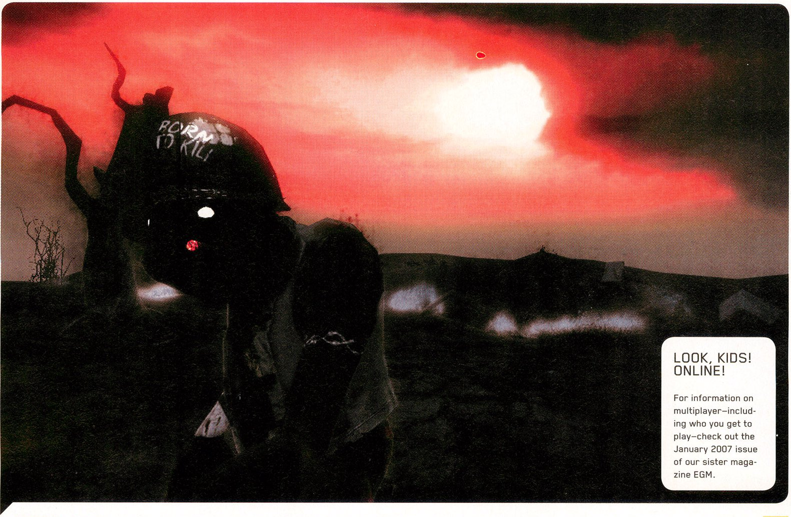
| pub. 2K Games Dev. Starbreeze release April

the Darkness

Stepping into the Otherworld



LOOK, KIDS! ONLINE!

For information on multiplayer—including who you get to play—check out the January 2007 issue of our sister magazine EGM.

WHOSE IDEA IS THIS?

When developer Starbreeze Studios was wrapping up its last project, it saw that the comic book property *The Darkness* (published by Top Cow) was available. "We got a lot of opportunities to do things like contemporary military shooters for PlayStation 2, but that's not really our thing," explains lead designer Jens Andersson. "*The Darkness* was a really perfect mix of what we wanted to do and what we were interested in. [Jackie Estacado] is a character that is defined by what he does—he's a strong character with an interesting story around him, and it was a good fit for Starbreeze."

WHAT'S THE IDEA?

A quick recap from the worldwide announcement of *The Darkness* in *OPM* #103: Main character Jackie Estacado is an orphan who is adopted by Uncle Paulie, a mob boss. On his 21st birthday, he becomes possessed by an entity known as the Darkness, which endows him with great powers. The story traces his struggle with both his uncle and with the Darkness, which he quickly starts to realize is not something that is good. At all. The game takes place in two different environments. The primary setting is present-day New York City, but a good deal of the game takes place in the "Otherworld," an alternate dimension (modeled after a warped version of World War I) that is the home of the Darkness. As Jackie stumbles around this other world, the Darkness (which is voiced by Faith No More lead singer Mike Patton) will frequently speak directly into his ears. Whenever this happens, the screen blurs and colors skew, helping communicate the sense that maybe the Darkness is not really something you want to have possessing your insides.

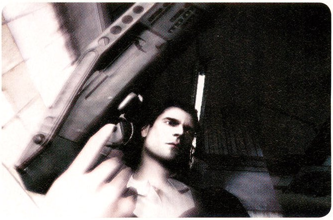
As the level we saw booted up, Jackie was immediately confronted by one of the denizens of this other world, a soldier whose face has been scarred from innumerable war injuries. After Jackie shot him, he collapsed to the ground, but a few minutes later, he pieced himself back together and rose up again. One way to keep soldiers from coming back to "life" is to use your Darkness-enabled ability to devour enemies. In addition to eliminating enemies, devouring also allows you to earn additional Darkness powers. You can also drop enemies down bottomless pits, which ends their cycle of resurrection.

If you want assistance, you can also summon darklings, which are basically little evil henchmen that are one of the side benefits of your Darkness possession (they can use guns, blow themselves up, and destroy light sources). You'll know you've hit a darkling summoning point when you see sparks shooting out, say from a light or a loose fuse.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Starbreeze has already proven that they can do excellent work based on licensed properties with its last game, *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*—it's just that PlayStation gamers might not know that since the title was only on Xbox and PC. And the combination of story, crazy environments, and unique mechanics is unlike anything else out there right now.

A GOOD DEAL OF THE GAME TAKES PLACE IN THE OTHER-WORLD...



| pub. TBA dev. Pandemic release Q1 2007

Mercenaries 2 world in flames

Dropping the mother of all...

WHAT'S NEW SINCE THE LAST GAME?
For all of you ordnance fetishists out there, the MOAB is making its appearance in *Mercs 2*. While those guys are busy salivating, for the uninformed, a MOAB is short for "Massive Ordnance Air Blast" bomb (the colloquial version is "mother of all bombs") where it's supposedly the largest and most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. military. In fact, when videos of a MOAB blast are shown to civilians, they tend to incorrectly identify it as a nuclear explosion. Yikes.

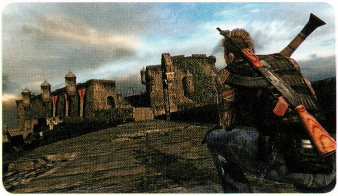
Besides having a massive weapon of wanton destruction, players can now rescue and capture people. So now all the destruction courtesy of things like the MOAB, vehicles like the Endriago and the La Rana (the former is an attack helicopter, the latter is a beefed-up APC), and weapons like antiaircraft missiles (also known as MANPADs, for Man-Portable Air Defense System) can be balanced by saving civilians or capturing hostiles. Another new gameplay tweak that complements the destruction is the acquisition of fuel. While you won't need to worry about hitting up the gas pump for a jeep or a tank, you do need to obtain the fuel necessary for an airstrike before calling one in, so if snagging a barrel of oil is hard work, you better make that airstrike worth it.

The other big news is the presence of "modern pirates." Which gets us thinking a lot. We hope this doesn't mean a bunch of guys burning DVD bootlegs. Do modern pirates still hoist the Jolly Roger and make people walk the plank? Do they replace cutlasses and pirate pistols with machetes and Magnums? Do they drink grog or Captain Morgan's? It's mysteries like these that occupy our minds when we're simply told that pirates are in the game.

THE MOAB, THE MOTHER OF ALL BOMBS, IS PRESENT IN MERCS 2...

HOW DOES IT PUSH THE PS3?
One nice bit of news that anyone who has played *Turok* for the N64 can appreciate is that *Mercs 2* will have no fog. Not even "really good draw distance with minimal fog." Just none. You can see far into the distance, and the only thing obscuring your vision will be smoke from fires (that you hopefully caused). Besides that, *Mercs 2* will also be one of the big pushers of physics-based gameplay, especially when it comes to using and manipulating fire as a weapon.

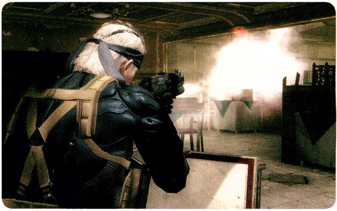
IS IT STILL RELEVANT?
The previous *Mercenaries* was both a success story in terms of pure games sales and as an example of creating a new intellectual property in a sequel-driven industry. *Mercs 2* could have easily been a lazy sequel, but so far, it looks like a nice, properly next-generation–ized version of the first game.

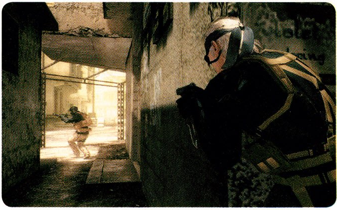


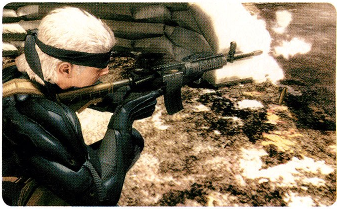
| pub. Konami Dev. Kojima Productions release 2007

Metal Gear Solid 4

Snake's on the plain!







WHAT'S NEW SINCE THE LAST GAME?
How about pretty much everything? New camera angle (not only does it have *MGS3: Subsistence's* third-person view, but it seems to have an over-the-shoulder camera view as well), new setting, new versions of characters (Snake is old! Raiden is a cybernetic ninja! Otacon is a guy hiding in his room!), and some new gameplay mechanics. The camouflage system that was in *MGS3* has been revamped to feel more natural and reactive (rather than select a color scheme from a menu, Snake's Octo-Camo seems to naturally blend in with whatever he's touching). Soldiers are no longer just the enemy—depending on what Snake does, soldiers he runs into can be either friend or foe. Heck, when enemies spot you, they may not even have the old exclamation mark—the animation and AI will just naturally clue you in to how they're now clued in to your presence.

HOW DOES IT PUSH THE PS3?
Way back, like an E3 or two ago, Kojima talked about how he'd like to focus on what the user *doesn't* see, like the subtle details of interior cracks and insects crawling inside said cracks within trees, and how that affects the tree overall. Even though we haven't seen any forest areas, we can see Kojima's been applying that same sense of simulating the subtle, under-the-hood mechanics of destructible buildings and their structural integrity (which are part of his "nowhere to hide" philosophy for *MGS4*) or the mental machinations of the AI. Finally, expect the usual PS3-pushing features, such as snazzier graphics (including what we like to call "Old Man Mustache Mapping"), and use of the Sixaxis motion sensor.

IS IT STILL RELEVANT?
With this title often being cited as the killer app that will get hardcore gamers to plunk down their dollars for the PS3, yeah, we think so. It also seems like this is truly the conclusion to the *Metal Gear Solid* (there is still room to make "*Metal Gear Blank*") series, making it a significant bookend to one of the most important PlayStation franchises to date.

THINK IN YARDS. NOT INCHES.

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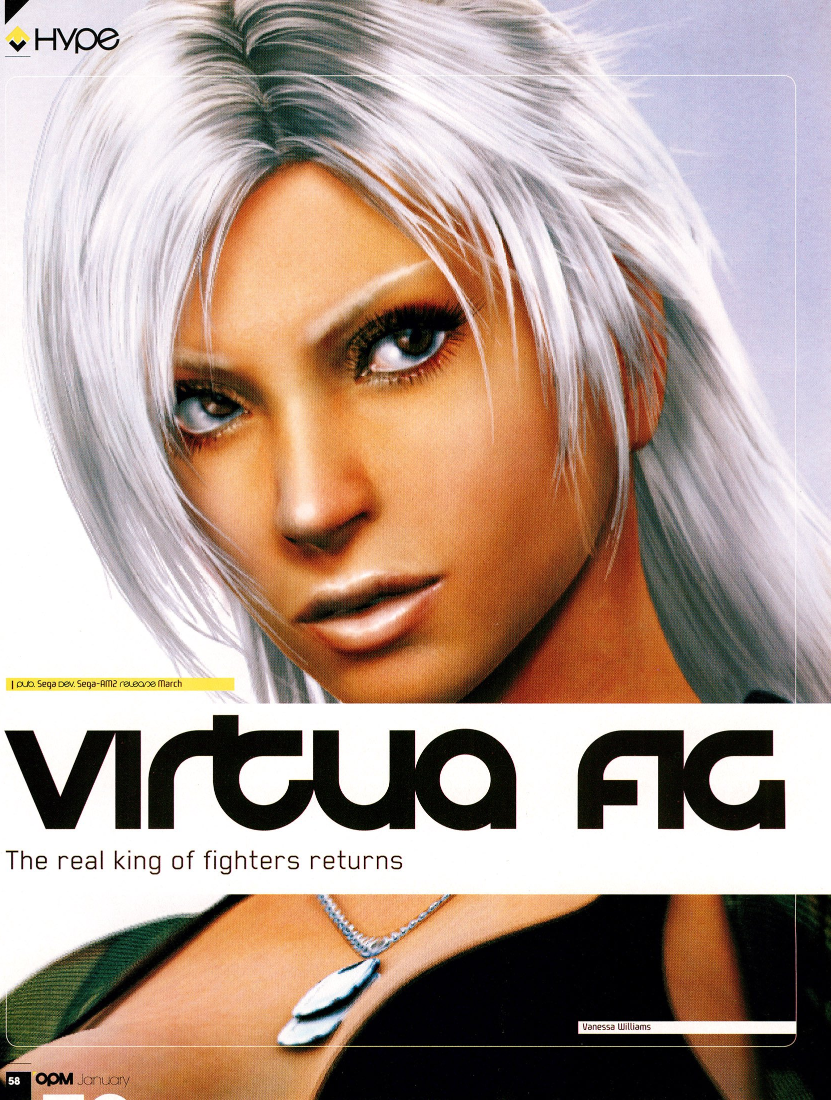


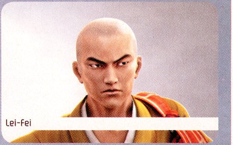
| pub. Sega dev. Sega-AM2 release March

VIRTUA FIG

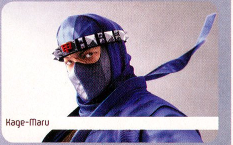
The real king of fighters returns

Vanessa Williams

Sarah Bryant


Lei-Fei

Lau Chan


Kage-Maru

Jacky Bryant

Goh Hinogami

El Blaze

Eileen

hter 5

Aoi Umenokouji

Akira Yuki

WHAT'S NEW SINCE THE LAST GAME?

The biggest addition to *Virtua Fighter 5*, aside from the ramped-up graphics, is the two new characters—Eileen and El Blaze. Eileen is incredibly quick and nimble. Her standard combinations are very powerful and a little unorthodox, making it difficult to predict if her strikes are going to hit high or low. Her speed also allows her to get the drop on opponents pretty fast, making it easy to do a quick run-in for a throw or an equally fast sidestep into a combination. El Blaze, a luchador wrestler, is equally quick, but for *Virtua Fighter* fans, he can be best described as an essentially faster, albeit little less powerful, version of Wolf. In fact, he even shares some of the same throws as Wolf, such as the huracanrana leg throw. But much like Eileen, his fighting style is pretty unpredictable at first, and his speed enables him to get quick combinations in and to jump away before an opponent can launch a counterattack.

At the moment, there's another new feature for the home version of *Virtua Fighter 5* that's been sort of present in the arcade version found around Japan where commentators actually call the match. AM2 has decided to integrate a commentary feature into the PS3 version of *VF5* where a play-by-play announcer and a color commentator will describe what's going on in the match. But don't expect something on the level of NBA- or NFL-style commentary. These guys will just give somewhat general descriptions of what's going on, like if one player is dominating the match or if one of the players isn't particularly good at blocking.

AM2 HAS DECIDED TO INTEGRATE A PLAY-BY-PLAY COMMENTARY FEATURE IN VF5

HOW DOES IT PUSH THE PS3?

If anything, *Virtua Fighter 5* will serve as a showcase for the technical awesomeness of the PlayStation 3. The character models look absolutely amazing and they animate much better than in any previous *Virtua Fighter* to date. Plus, all of the environments look equally great and have plenty of nice effects, especially water, which flows and reacts realistically with fighter movement. There are also all kinds of cool cloth movement and other subtle effects that really shine on an HDTV.

Fortunately, *VF5* will use other aspects of the PS3 hardware as well, namely online play. We haven't seen it up and running quite yet, but online play should be pretty interesting for a game that requires such precise movement and pressing of buttons.

IS IT STILL RELEVANT?

You bet. The *Virtua Fighter* series has always been regarded as one of the most finely tuned franchises in the genre, and the fifth game in the series, incredibly, feels even tighter and more balanced than ever before. Of course, it may not have the mainstream appeal or even ease of use that the *Tekken* series has enjoyed over the years, that doesn't change the fact that *Virtua Fighter* essentially represents the cream of the crop for the hardcore fighting fan.

| pub. Konami Dev. Kojima Productions release December

METAL GEAR SOLID: portable ops

Putting a python in your pocket

So far, there have been two landmark PSP titles: *Lumines*, for being the launch puzzle game that justified the PSP's existence for most people, and *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, for proving that you could fit *GTA* to the platform. Now it looks like a similar milestone will arrive in the form of the first "true" *MGS* title, *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops*. Kojima Productions international manager Ryan Payton comments that *MGS: PO* isn't just a tactical action game like the home-console *MGS* titles; there's a new strategy layer on top of the action. Not only do you sneak around and fight dudes as usual, but you also have to deploy your troops and have them perform their own missions while you do your Snake thing.

The story begins with Big Boss being thrown in a Colombian jail and meeting a young Roy Campbell, who breaks out with you and proposes to team up and take down the traitorous FOX unit. What they then need to do is create an army, which is done initially by just knocking out and dragging enemy soldiers back to your truck.

Afterward that, the game world opens up. There's a large map filled with areas, and you can just jump around the map to different objectives (making this a more open-ended *MGS*). While you actively play one team of four characters in one mission, you can have other teams scouring different parts of the map, which can unlock side missions that earn you extra items or personnel when you play them yourself.

Also, each recruit (all named after animals) is graded on a variety of skills, with "C" being the worst and "S" being the best. Skills include CQC combat, aptitude with guns, and even technical or medical skills. Grouping recruits of similar skillsets yields bonuses (i.e. a dedicated medical team helps you recover health and stamina). A bizarre thing we noticed: San Francisco Wi-Fi spots (to recruit a character via Wi-Fi, you just scan for an access point and repeatedly press Circle to fill a meter) produced characters with crap combat skills and great technical skills, making us a city of engineers instead of soldiers. Like in real life!

Now, the most interesting tidbit that you can only read about right here in *OPM* is just how far the recruitment mechanic goes: You can recruit bosses. If you know what you're doing, you can snag badasses like Python (a big dude who freezes people with his fists—he's voiced by Dwight Schultz, better known as "Howling Mad" Murdock of the A-Team) or even the main baddie himself, Gene. Similar to *MGS3*, sometimes you just have to lower the boss' stamina to convert him to your side, but other times, you're going to have to figure out a special trick to get them to defect. As expected, these characters will probably

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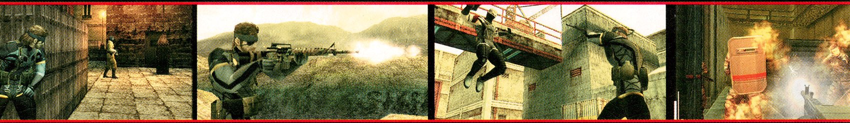

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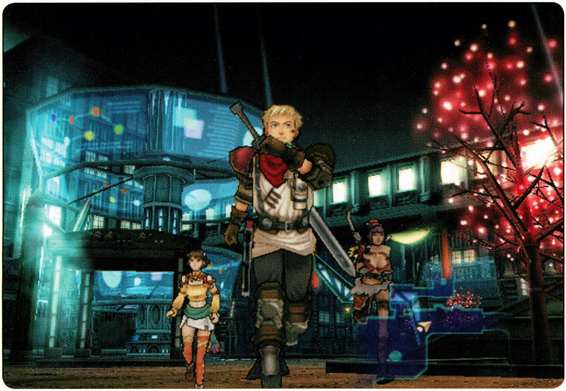
| pub. Sony CEA dev. Level-5 release. January

Rogue Galaxy

There are RPGs besides Final Fantasy?



Is there life for a post–*Final Fantasy XII* RPG to hit the PS2? Sony thinks so, as they're bringing over the latest RPG from the ever-so-reliable Level-5 (creator of the *Dark Cloud* games and a big part of *Dragon Quest VIII*).

Rogue Galaxy is full of what you can expect from a typical Level-5 production. Fantastic graphics, actiony combat (you have three characters in your party, and while you directly control one, you can give basic commands to the other two), a frog that upgrades your weapons by eating them, and a weird minigame where you catch, then raise, and then enter space bugs in space-bug gladiator tournaments. And no load times to boot.

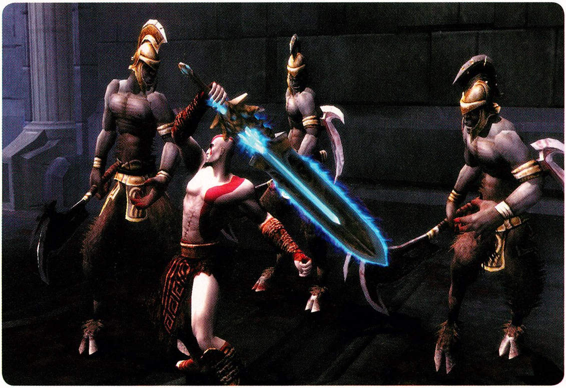
Even if you're one of those crazy gamers who imports games from the other side of the world, there're a host of changes being made for the U.S. version. Random chain attacks (now called Burning Strikes) are now not random—you pick up special orbs (Burning Orbs) that fill a meter; once said meter is filled, you can execute the Burning Strike. Which means you can actually use it as a tactical move. Other U.S. tweaks include a new planet, new gear for your characters, and some alterations to enemies and dungeons.

Finally, we like it when robots are so common that they have names like "Ted" or "Steve" instead of "Clicko142" or "Bizzobot."

| pub. Sony CEA dev. Sony CEA release. February

God of War II

The last great PS2 game?



Without a doubt one of the PS2's most shining moments was when a beam of light would break through and reflect off Kratos' whirling blades as he diced and sliced his way through enemies like a Benihana chef hyped up on a triple-shot latte with a side of Benzedrine. *God of War* quickly won a spot in the pantheon of "best PS2 games ever" lists, which is why it was no surprise that a sequel was announced. While *God of War II* won't have the fresh impact of its predecessor, it does promise more gorgeous graphics, excellent fighting maneuvers, and a whole new set of dastardly villains who are meddling in the lives of anyone in their way.

What we know so far: Kratos realizes pretty quickly that his whole immortality status does not mean he's immune to being toyed with, or even being killed. He gets dispatched by enemies, ends up in Hades, and spends the rest of the time beating up dudes in an attempt to figure out who on earth (or in heaven) was behind this. Oh, and he also gives a shout-out to his homies in Sparta (isn't it cool when game editors get all street?).

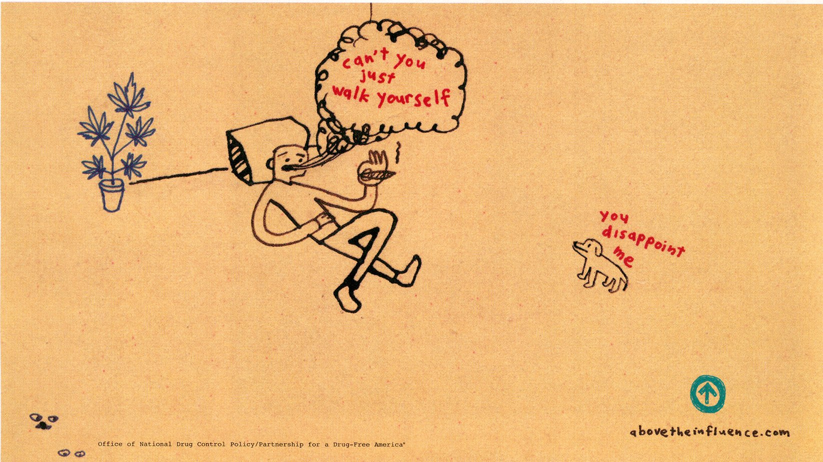
What we don't know but predict courtesy of the infallible Magic-8 ball: Kratos fights his way up Mount Olympus, meets up with Shaun White and the SSX duders, decides that rage thing is so 2003, and becomes a snowboarder.

| pub. 2K Games dev. Climax release February 2007

Ghost Rider

GO TO HELL

Equal parts *Devil May Cry* and *God of War*, *Ghost Rider* the game—a prequel to the Columbia Pictures film starring Nicolas Cage as the burning-skulled hero and set for theaters February 16—brings a burst of action-adventure to the PS2's dessert years. You play motorcycle daredevil Johnny Blaze, who tragically deals his soul to the satanic Mephisto in exchange for saving his father from cancer—only to then see his father suddenly die a different way. Duped and pissed off, Blaze becomes the Spirit of Vengeance, a.k.a. Ghost Rider, a demon with a conscience and gnarly powers like super strength, the ability to shoot hellfire from his hands, the penance stare (which inflicts the pain and suffering that the target has caused onto others back to him) and chains of vengeance for both ranged and up-close-and-personal combat. Developed by Climax Studios (ATV Offroad Fury 4), *Ghost Rider's* action is set entirely in hell, with some pretty intense fighting, hordes of hell-spawned enemies and boss battles, and Road Rash-style motorcycle (G's main ride) sequences. 2K also promises cool unlockable bonuses like the Making of Ghost Rider and the Art of Ghost Rider. And you get to hear a weathered and wisened Sam Elliott repeatedly say "There you go" in the power-up screens. Awesome.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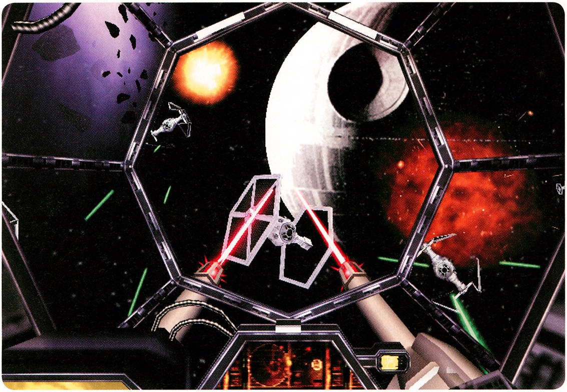
| pub. Ubisoft dev. Ubisoft release. December

Star Wars Lethal Alliance

A Twi'lek, a priest, and a droid walk into a bar...

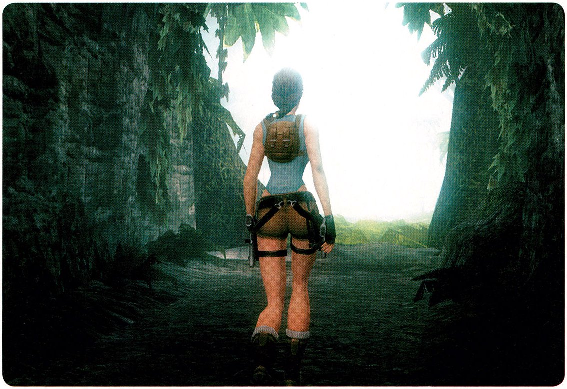


Hey, are you sick of PS2 ports that have the required 30 percent content difference when appearing on the PSP? Well, don't dismiss this title then, as *Star Wars Lethal Alliance* is actually a new *Star Wars* game built specifically for the PSP. The story is pretty straightforward: Did you or your fellow *Star Wars*-aholics ever wonder how the heck Princess Leia got the plans to the first Death Star? Well, this Twi'lek named Rianna Saren and her droid Zeeo did the legwork in obtaining the plans. You get to take your twin-tailed head to many of the major locales within the Star Wars lore, and in said locations, you engage in third person "collaborative combat." This is fancy *Star Wars* speak for "you control the Twi'lek, and occasionally use her droid for puzzle and combat purposes." Uses for the droid include: a grabbing point for platforming puzzles, a sort of wall-climbing bumper car for when you ride him along magnetic portions of walls to get somewhere, or a hacking tool to open doors or disable security systems. You can't use him as a weapon per se, but he does have his uses during boss battles, such as one with an angry rancor where you make him fly into a rancor's mouth in order to choke the beast, allowing you a moment to shove a grenade down its throat as Zeeo flies out of its mouth (yikes).

| pub. Eidos dev. Crystal Dynamics release. Q1 2007

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

One-year anniversary of the 10-year anniversary

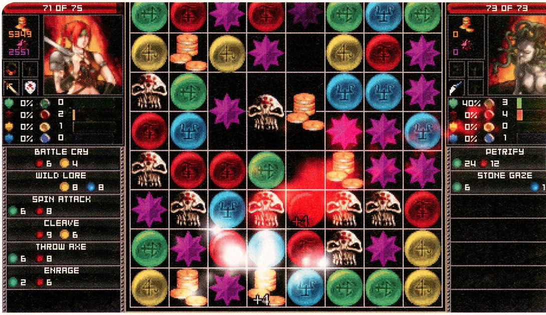


Apparently, 10 years ago, it was perfectly acceptable to release a third-person action-exploration game with no camera control. We were all hunky-dory with letting the camera follow the character with no input from us. What the hell were we thinking back then? Anyhow, that is one of the many changes being made to *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, a 10th-anniversary remake of the original *Tomb Raider*, but done with the *Tomb Raider: Legend* engine. Yes, games have officially joined the remake wagon that the movie industry has blazed many a trail with (see *The Departed, Scarface, King Kong, Battle Beyond the Stars*, all 67 *Ring* movies). *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* maintains the same basic structure and feel of the original, but with tweaks. Changes range from the obvious—such as graphics—to the subtle, like the fact that Lara moves a lot faster than she did back in 1996. Or that she has a playable grappling hook, a tool that was just a cut-scene toy in the first game. Additionally, moving from a grid-based system to a more natural control scheme means that while the puzzles will still feel the same, they'll also be more challenging. An example: a puzzle where Lara finds cogs to attach to a massive machine—you still run around to find cogs, but now there are more *TR: Legend*-style platforming elements present.

| pub. D3 dev. Infinite release March platform PSP

puzzle quest:
challenge of the warlords

Challenge accepted!


71 OF 75
5349
2551
0% 0
0% 2
0% 1
0% 0
BATTLE CRY
6 4
WILD LORE
8 8
SPIN ATTACK
6 8
CLEAVE
9 6
THROW AXE
6 8
ENRAGE
2 6
+1
+1
73 OF 73
0
0
40% 3
0% 4
0% 0
0% 1
PETRIFY
24 12
STONE GAZE
6 1

Think of *Puzzle Quest* as the result of that one night when *Bejeweled* had a bit too much to drink and ended up hooking up with that *Warlord* (the fantasy turn-based strategy games for the PC) casting sultry glances her way from the corner. You choose a hero to play as—available options are knight, warrior, druid, or wizard—and then travel around the map, getting quests, fighting enemies, and using your experience points to level up spells and abilities. The cool part comes in battling, which takes the form of a *Bejeweled*-like grid. Different colored gems supply you with different types of mana, which then allow you to cast spells; purple stars gain you XP; coins add to your gold supply; and skulls deal damage to the enemy. And it behooves you to line up as many as possible—eliminating four or more of the same item gets you another turn, and five or more offers a wild card that could help double or quadruple your mana gain. And if you lose, no worries—you still gain a small amount of XP from the experience and you can dive right back in and try again. This is one of those "more about the gameplay than it is about the graphics" titles that almost feel at home on the Nintendo DS. And we mean that in a positive way—while we're a sucker for a pretty picture, it doesn't hold up if you don't have any substance underneath.

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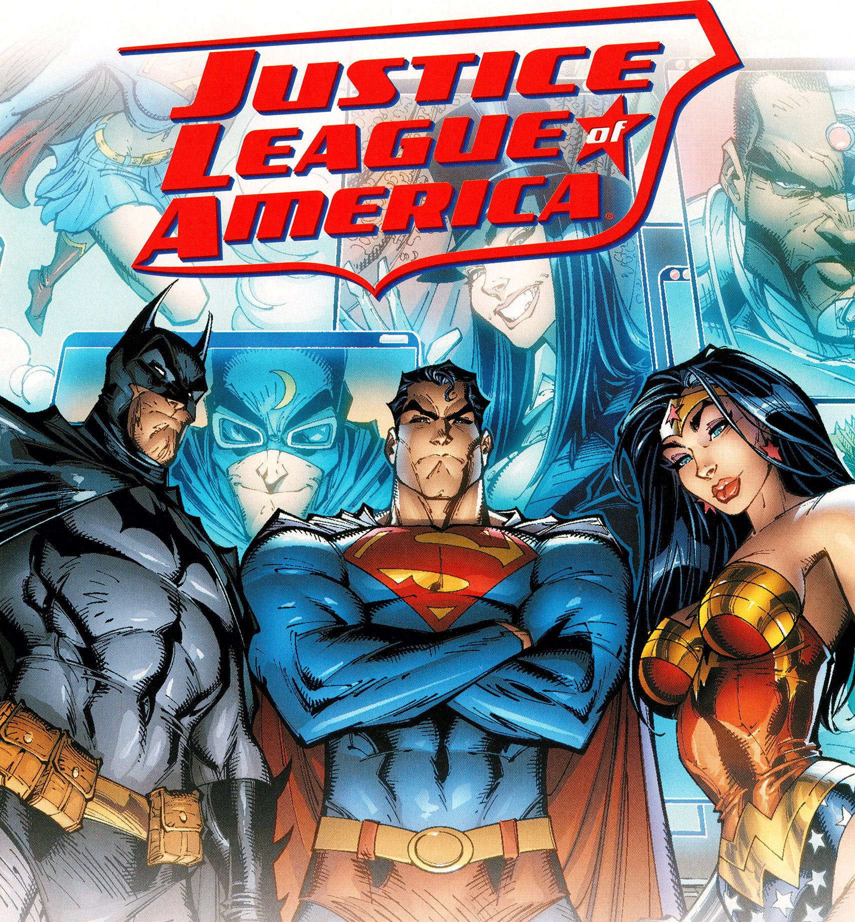

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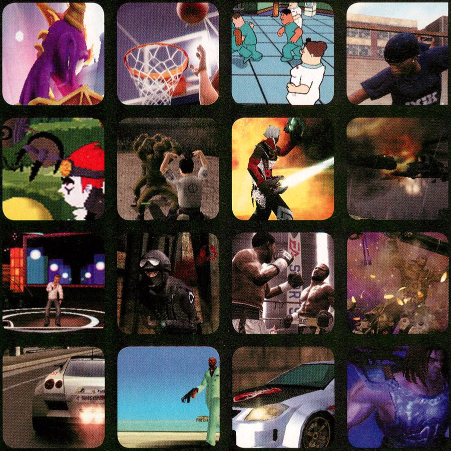
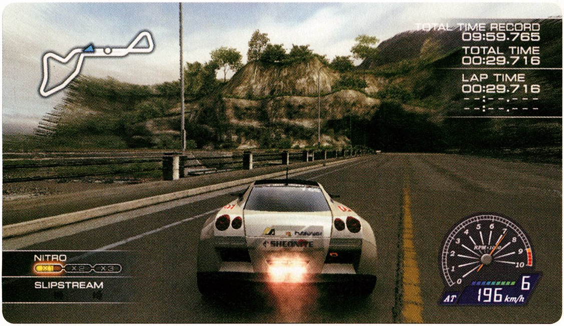




PS3

Ridge Racer 7

Kaz Hirai's enthusiasm is unfounded

| pub. Namco dev. Namco
esrb E msrp $59.99

What would a PlayStation launch be without a brand new *Ridge Racer* to go along with it? Sadly, *Ridge Racer 7* doesn't make quite the same splash as the original Ridge Racer or *Ridge Racer V* did for their respective systems. That's certainly not because *Ridge Racer 7* looks terrible or the mechanics are horrendous—it looks good and plays like a *Ridge Racer* game should play, like an arcade-style racing game. But that's not enough any more.

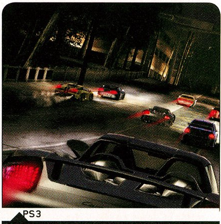
In fact, *Ridge Racer 7* feels like little more than a rehash with little or nothing worthwhile to really make you stand up and take notice of it. For example, the slipstream mechanic in *RR7* is a nice new feature but it's something that other games have done before and done better. Indeed, most of the time the slipstream is actually more bothersome, since you're constantly defending against it while in first place or rarely in a position where it's very useful unless you're in a 1-on-1 situation with the leader of the pack. On the other hand, the addition of nitrous—which was pulled from the PSP game—is still a nice addition and adds to the importance of drifting in the game. But still, it all feels so mundane because, if you're a *Ridge Racer* fan, you've played it plenty of times already.

Aside from the visuals, which are crisp and clean, the only other notable feature *Ridge Racer 7* has is the feeling of progression. Moving from race to race and upgrading your cars is one of the main reasons why you'll keep playing, particularly since your car also factors into the online experience as well. However, some may find it a little tedious simply because the mechanics of driving in *Ridge Racer 7* no longer do enough to give you the visceral thrill of its counterparts.

It's really more "yawn" than "whoa." | **Giancarlo Varanini**

PROS Looks great, plays as a *Ridge Racer* game should, customization is pretty fun
CONS *Ridge Racer* mechanics are dated, splitscreen two-player takes a massive framerate hit

score **6** | 10



PS3

Need for Speed Carbon:

It's Need for Speed again, in hi-def

| pub. EA Games dev. EA Black Box
esrb E10+ msrp $59.99

When *Carbon* was released on the PS2 last month, we questioned why it didn't boast any online modes, despite the Xbox 360 version rocking some awesome modes. Thankfully, EA Black Box has seen fit to grace the PS3 version with more than just snazzier graphics, it also features two pursuit-based online chases: tag, which has a single racer pursued by up to seven cops in a game of cat-and-mouse throughout the huge city, and knockout, which sees racers morphing into cops if they finish a lap in last place. Both are great fun, but we do question why they were saved just for the next-gen version of the game.

Speaking of newfangledness, though, it's worth noting that the graphics are nice and sharp, and unlike a bunch of the PS3's launch games, it does support the Sixaxis, albeit only to a mild degree. If you're the kind of person that plays racing games and waves the controller around in an attempt to will the car around a bend, you'll love this, as tilting the pad will add a little more response to the steering. It's subtle, but certainly not without some merit.

Aside from these changes, though, it's essentially the same game as the PS2 version. Previous *Need for Speed*s have dramatically changed the way we look at racing games. Most recently, *Underground* moved the needle on presentation, and *Most Wanted* revived the ideas that made *Hot Pursuit 2* so beloved. While *Carbon* is peppered with clever ideas, ultimately it falls victim to EA's insistence on annually iterating a franchise. It refines previous ideas, but lacks that big "wow" factor we've seen in the past. It's thoroughly competent and shouldn't be overlooked, but it really is "Need for Speed Again." | **John Davison**

VERDICT More of more of the same, only more.

score **7.5** | 10

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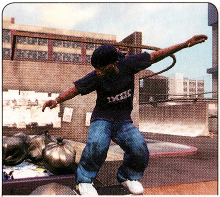


PS3

Tony Hawk's Project 8

The Birdman soars again

| pub. Activision dev. Neversoft
esrb T msrp $59.99

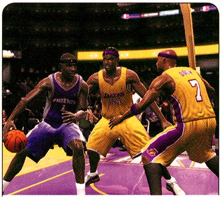
It seems to me that Tony Hawk has more sequels than Rocky, Freddy Krueger, and, uh, Debbie (the one who does the whole city of Dallas). It's just too bad his previous game, *American Wasteland*, had that straight-to-video feel about it. Thankfully, Tony hasn't bailed out on us; he brings some effort this time, reminding us why we fell in love with the series in the first place. And I did fall in love again. I'm totally shallow—and, well, *Project 8* does have a purdy face.

Project 8 continues the *Tony Hawk* trend of moving away from the cartoony look of earlier games. *Project 8* has a glossy feel to it, which compliments well when the game goes all slow-mo on you. The developers have been trying to find the next innovative trick that will move the franchise forward, such as the Revert or Manual, and I think they've finally found it with the new Nail the Trick feature. Slowing down time and trying to spin your board around is nifty, but it's still in its infancy. I hear that they're going to add more to it by implementing elements like grabs, but *Tony Hawk* finally smells less stale and seems to be moving forward in the right direction.

The Sixaxis controls are fun to play with, but you'll most likely find yourself turning them off after a only a few minutes—combos are hard enough to perform without having to dance with your controller and twisting it sideways or dipping it so you don't bail on manuals. I also have a few minor complaints because I'm incredibly needy: I wish the environments were a tad bigger and the missions and contests had more variety—also, the PS3 version is sluggish compared to its 360 counterpart. Thankfully, the pros outweigh the cons: *Project 8* definitely welcomes fans back to the series. | James Lee

VERDICT A must-have for any die-hard fan; a good entry game for new players.

score 7.5 | 10



PS3

NBA07

Where's The D?

| pub. SCEA dev. Sony San Diego
esrb E msrp $59.99

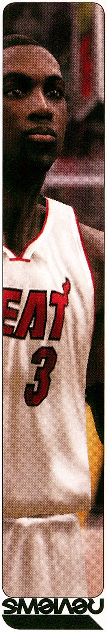
Let's get the good stuff out of the way. *NBA 07* looks much better than any Sony-produced basketball game has ever looked, particularly the player models (though the sweat effect is a little overdone). Now for the bad: *NBA 07*'s representation of the sport of basketball is, well, a bit off. For starters, if you have a single decent 3-point shooter on your team, your chances of running up the court and sinking a 3-pointer nearly every time are pretty darn good. You're all but guaranteed to sink it virtually every single time you make the attempt, as long as you're not making an awkward shot or the defense doesn't swat the ball.

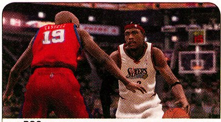
But that's giving the defense in *NBA 07* a bit too much credit. More often that not, it feels more like you're playing an *NBA Jam*, run-and-gun-style arcade game simply because it's so easy to jam the ball right up the court and go for a quick 3-pointer or a dunk. There are times when the defense is a little smarter—like when a defender actually plays a passing lane and manages to intercept or bat the ball out of bounds—but rarely does it ever feel like you really need to break the opposing team down in a half-court set. On top of that, rebounding feels a little out of whack since your own AI-controlled teammates seem to have more than their fair share of problems when going for a loose ball.

The rest of the game also falls pretty short of giving a complete experience. The season and extra modes are all pretty standard, offering little beyond what's been out there nearly since the inception of videogame basketball. Plus, there's already a better basketball game available on the PlayStation 3 anyway, so unless you're looking for more of an arcade game than a sim, *NBA 07* really fails to deliver the goods. | Giancarlo Varanini

PROS Looks fairly nice
CONS Defense is pretty dumb, and you can abuse 3-pointers like no one's business

score 5 | 10





PS3

NBA2K7

How Basketball Should Be Done

| pub. 2K Games dev. Visual Concepts
esrb E msrp $59.99

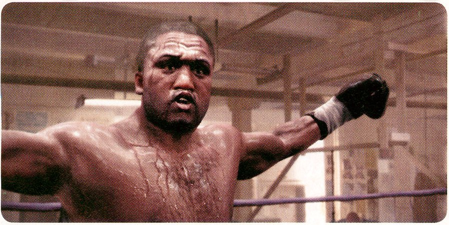
NBA 2K7 is one of the few instances where a visual upgrade actually does wonders for how the game feels when you're playing it. Not that the *2K* series was ever really bad to begin with, but the PlayStation 3 incarnation of Visual Concepts' latest basketball game benefits greatly from amped-up animation that only adds to what is a great basketball simulation. Some of these animations are relatively subtle, such as when a point guard waltzes up the court and bursts into a skip while calling a play. Others are much more visible, as you'll immediately recognize the signature shots of some of the game's bigger stars. Of course, not all of the players received equal treatment in terms of animation, but it goes such a long way toward replicating what basketball is exactly like.

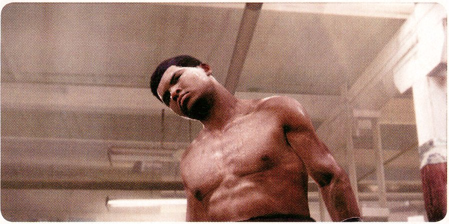
As for the gameplay, *2K7* also does a great job of actually making you feel like you have to break down the defense to get an open shot. Defenses will punish you for just trying to string around careless passes or jamming the ball through the paint for an easy dunk. Plus, it feels pretty darn rewarding when you execute a play to perfection or successfully bust the defense down. Still, there are a few hiccups here and there. Your AI teammates occasionally pull off some pretty stupid moves, such as not switching on a pick. Or when there's a loose ball, too many players just stand around and scratch their heads wondering what they should do.

The 24/7 mode also has some shortcomings. While the concept behind it—taking on the role of an unknown and working your way up through the ranks—is a good one that will keep you playing when you don't feel like doing a regular 5-on-5 game, it could've done without the incredibly cheesy story elements that are more annoying than anything else. Meanwhile, The Association mode, which basically serves as the franchise mode, has everything a basketball fanatic could want, including personnel changes. All of this makes for a great basketball game that should satisfy the cravings of any hungry PlayStation 3-owning basketball fan. | Giancarlo Varanini

PROS Animations are great, great 5-on-5 basketball
CONS Some lapses in AI, tedious story mode

score 7.5 | 10





PS3

Fight Night Round 3

The sweet science of pounding someone's face

| pub. EA Sports dev. EA Chicago
esrb T msrp $59.99

While the actual sport of boxing marches on without any sort of integrity, it's great that there are games like *Fight Night Round 3* to remind you why boxing is such an awesome sport to begin with. It's all about strategy and learning how your opponent fights in order to expose weaknesses and go in for the proverbial kill. And one thing *Round 3* does very well is pounding home this message: Bringing a good defense into the fight is just as important as bringing a good offense.

Most of that comes as a part of the counterpunch system. A moderately skilled fighter can get by early on by bobbing and weaving through an opponent's punches, but as you progress through the career mode or try to take on one of the high-profile boxers from the sport, you learn very quickly that such a strategy doesn't work anymore. Now you have to learn how to read punches and physically counter them, leaving your opponent open to a potentially vicious blow to the head or gut.

The fact that *Fight Night Round 3* has such an elegant learning curve is important, since the controls—which make extensive use of the right analog stick—may still be a little off-putting to most people, even though this is the third game in the series to use them. Yes, the face buttons also can be used, but don't be the person who plays *Fight Night* with buttons. Just don't be that guy.

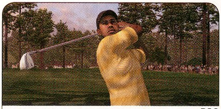
Fight Night Round 3 is arguably one of the best-looking—and one of the best-playing—boxing games to date, but it still has its issues. AI opponents in the later levels of the career mode can be absolutely cheap, managing to block and counter a good portion of your punches. It almost feels like you're fighting a brick wall, only the brick wall can beat the ever-living crap out of you. Additionally, the new Get in the Ring mode, which features first-person boxing, is a nice attempt at giving *Fight Night* a new feel, and while it does some things very well—such as the sensation of blacking out—the disembodied arms really take away from the whole experience, as does the fact that the control scheme doesn't feel quite right with a first-person perspective. But the great thing is that you don't have to use it, and any boxing fan will be extremely pleased with the selection of other features *Fight Night Round 3* offers. | **Giancarlo Varanini**

PROS Amazing-looking visuals, excellent learning curve and mechanics
CONS AI gets a little cheap, which sucks a bit of fun out of the later fights. First-person mode needs some tweaking, not a huge leap over *Round 2*

score 8 | 10

FISTS OF FURY

If you ask us, EA missed a chance to throw some unique tilt support into *Fight Night Round 3*. Just imagine viciously flicking each side of the controller to simulate punches. You know, like that one arcade game with the big glove-y things. You know what we're talking about. We're pretty sure it was called *Title Fight*. Anyway, that would be cool.



PS3

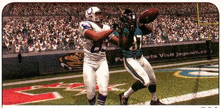
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

Burning bright

| pub. EA Sports dev. EA Sports
esrb E msrp $59.99

It's a second round of hardware launches for *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* and the results of Tiger's PlayStation 3 debut are much more respectable than those of his last outing. Graphically, *Tiger* is a mix of incredibly lifelike—albeit creepy—facial mapping that always garners a pop with every tick and expression, complimented by muddy texture and lazy foliage work that dampens the visual kick. Every game mode found in the current release of *Tiger Woods* for the 360 from career, minigames, and online play is available here as well. EA's implementation of the Sixaxis tilt control for ball spin is optional, thankfully, as it's largely unreliable. With few sure bets in the launch lineup, those who waited for *Tiger* on the PlayStation 3 won't be disappointed. | **Jared Rea**

score 7.5 | 10



PS3

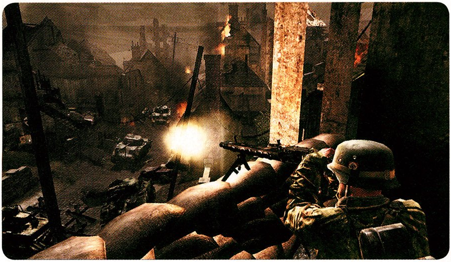
Madden NFL 07

There's always next year

| pub. EA Sports dev. EA Tiburon
esrb E msrp $59.99

With the next-gen engine already on its second iteration, and the extra time to polish up this year's version since the kickoff of the season, it's hard to swallow that *Madden NFL 07* on the PS3 can't even live up to the standard it sets on Xbox 360. Mechanically, everything works as it should, but visually, the presentation clearly lacks the vibrancy of its cousin. The graphics don't hold up on their own in a side-by-side comparison, either. The introduction of physics to the tackling system gives all the contact a more solid feel, and is sure to be a big part of next year's improved features list. Until then, this outing will make you happy you still have the superior PS2 version to play. | **Garnett Lee**

score 6.5 | 10



PS3

Call of Duty 3

Wild Wild WWII ride

| pub. Activision dev. Treyarch
esrb M msrp $59.99

For a while, everyone thought that any World War II shooter not titled *Medal of Honor* was going to get buried by the EA juggernaut. Yet, with a bunch of the *MOH* talent at the helm, the *Call of Duty* franchise has emerged as a respectable, fine-selling series of WWII FPS games. Part of what makes *COD* so appealing is that it's perhaps the most cinematic of the various WWII franchises (funny, since *MOH* is based on the Spielberg-produced *Band of Brothers*, but then again, *COD's* developers have the *MOH* legacy). The COD games may not advance the genre in terms of pure gameplay and FPS mechanics, but they offer consistent, in-your-face experiences. In effect, they seem to be the roller coasters of the genre: You always have the same ride and everything happens at the appropriate trigger points, but it's a damn fun ride to take.

So *Call of Duty 3* is another game that spans multiple perspectives across a single campaign. Instead of the Americans, the British, and the Russians, we now have the Americans and the British, with the Russians replaced by the power pair of the Canadians and the Poles. The campaign centers around the further rescue of France from Axis forces after D-Day, which translates into an opening level that is, thankfully, not a retread of D-Day.

This time, though, *COD3* features occasional branching within missions (e.g., go left to shoot up some artillery or go right to just keep shooting Nazis), but those are pretty much like the three branching paths in the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland—different and slight variations on the same thing where you ultimately end up in the same place no matter what.

Thanks to the PS3, *COD3* features pretty snazzy graphics (particular kudos to the weird focus effect that blurs and hazes your view when you're looking down your scope, and to the best smoke I've seen in a game), and some quirky uses of the tilt sensor. Sure, quick turns for melee attacks make sense, but on top of that, you can drive jeeps, plant bombs, or defuse enemy bombs (you rotate it like a screwdriver), and even row a boat with the tilt control.

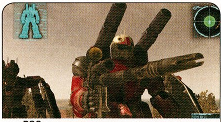
COD3 maintains its roller-coaster feel—it's a great showcase experience rather than an innovative game, with some minor tweaks such as the illusion of freedom and cool uses for the tilt sensor. It's not the best WWII game by any stretch, but it's a damn reliable ride. **| Thierry Nguyen**

ALLIES It's more *COD*; tilt sensor is neat.
AXIS It's more *COD*

score 7.5 | 10

COBRA!

Call of Duty 3 focuses on Operation Cobra, which was the US Army plan to rapidly expand forces beyond Normandy and tear through the French countryside. The Allies advanced so rapidly, that the operation ended not because the Germans fought the Allies off, but because the Allies ran out of food and weapons due to just being awesome.



PS3

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM: CROSSFIRE

Gundam this mess

| pub. Namco Bandai dev. Namco Bandai
esrb T msrp $59.99

I think I know how this mess happened. *Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire* is actually a *prototype* that Namco Bandai accidentally sent to stores. What else would explain how an awesome concept—giant mechs based on a kickass anime battling it out for earthly domination—could result in such a baffling, difficult, half-effort whose questionable quality wouldn't be acceptable on a PS1, let alone the purported most powerful console known to humankind?

The evidence that *Crossfire* shipped at least a year too early begins with the overall lackluster presentation: ho-hum graphics in often-barren landscapes, mailed-in voice acting, mission-briefing screens so stark they could easily be mistaken for debug alerts. Moving into the first actual game area (training), you'll wonder if there's something wrong with your PS3...or is the mech really moving at like 20 frames per second? Did I just inadvertently drop my shield and have NO WAY TO PICK IT BACK UP? And what is with the camera? It's not static, which is good, but it's like you're playing in drunk mode—go ahead, get into combat with another mech and you'll learn the meaning of confused chaos.

Even in easy mode, *Crossfire's* enemy AI is extremely aggressive and will smack you down in seconds. In level design, *Crossfire* gets downright baffling. You have huge arenas, to be sure, but if you look at your map, you'll notice a yellow rectangle. That's your gameplay space—you can't go beyond the borders. What you see in the game is, well, nothing. There's this invisible wall that you can't go beyond, though it looks like you can.

Crossfire has some great ideas, especially in its strategy-focused undercurrents. This is, after all, a game of world domination. But therein lies the problem: *Crossfire* is a game that's a bundle of potential, with none of the payoff—in the end, it comes off as a pitch rather than a product. Let's hope that Namco Bandai issues an "oops" and ships the real game soon. **| Tom Byron**

VERDICT If this is what passes for next gen, then next gen has a ways to go.

score 3 | 10

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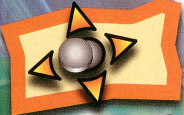

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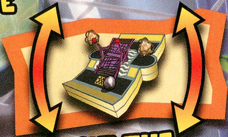

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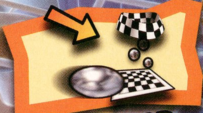

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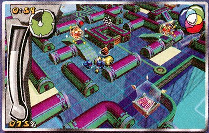

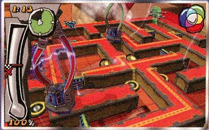

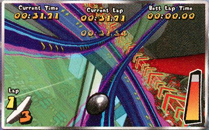
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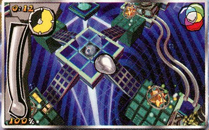

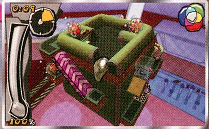

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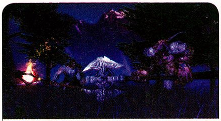


PS3

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

My kingdom for a good game

| pub. Sony Online dev. Sony Online
esrb T msrp $59.99

The hack-n-slash genre is not an innovative one by any means, but it can usually be relied upon to provide a decently entertaining if not mentally challenging time. Sadly, *Dark Kingdom* has enough rough edges to knock it from being fun into being a chore.

Dark Kingdom tweaks the standard formula of collecting loot and selling it to buy upgrades and potions. Instead, you're gaining essence and health and mana from killing enemies; essence can then be traded in at save points for better armor and/or filling your health and mana. What sucks is that resting no longer allows your health and mana to replenish (although maddeningly, it does for some of your enemies), nor are there potions to refill a low health bar. This is particularly problematic when you find yourself low on health with another wave of enemies between you and the next save point; you'll want to keep multiple saves on hand in case you need to backtrack.

When you aren't nervously eying your health bar, you're counting wave after wave of the same enemies in many similar-looking blue-tinged environments. Swapping up the characters doesn't help either, as the three options play a lot more similarly than they should.

Glitches abound—things fall into walls, clipping problems are very pervasive, enemies often get knocked above you and stand perched on thin air. And while the camera is controllable, that doesn't stop it from frequently spinning out of control and getting stuck behind walls.

Even the story is embarrassing. There are parts that come across as sincere ye olde high fantasy, and then for some reason every now and then you'll encounter an enemy that tries (and fails) to be irreverently humorous. It's weirdly inconsistent, and it comes off about as well as that time your dad told you to check out the new bling on his car, yo.

Overall, it's a disappointing effort at best, and only recommended if you're a sports-, car-, and gun-allergic PS3 owner grasping for something to play. | **Dana Jongewaard**

VERDICT Tedious is not a synonym for challenging.

score **5** | 10

PS3

GENJI: Days of the Blade

Pretty. Disappointing.

| pub. Game Republic dev. Sony CEA
esrb T msrp $59.99

If you go back and read reviews of last year's *Genji: Dawn of the Samurai* for the PS2, you'll find this consistent criticism: It was too short (some reviewers claimed to have finished in four hours).

So you'd think, at the bare minimum, all developer Game Republic had to do was to make the sequel longer, right? Wrong.

It's true that *Genji: Days of the Blade* is a longer game—about three times longer. But longer doesn't mean better, especially when "longer" is apparently defined as recycled levels (the kind, for instance, where two characters complete a level, then two other characters go through the exact same level with only minor differences in the experience), lots of backtracking, and a frustrating design that sends you on fishing expeditions because there's no obvious way to know if you're on the right track thanks to a useless map. The game's uneven pacing is just plain unnerving: Long, meandering, and sometimes confusing levels can lead into similar levels, and what seems like a "boss battle" is often followed by yet another boss battle.

Days of the Blade's fixed camera is as unforgiving as it is unforgivable. This would be OK if there were a way to center or look around. But there isn't. THERE ISN'T. Expect plenty of situations where you can't see enemies—and sometimes, not even yourself.

It's not all bad news. Like the original, *Days of the Blade* is an intense action-adventure with a fantastic combat system that lets you switch on the fly between up to four characters, hacking and slashing your way through levels. In character design, control, and management, *Days of the Blade* shines. Distinct weapons and fighting styles lead to combos that are powerful and fun to execute.

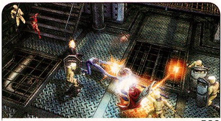
As a PS2 game, *Days of the Blade* might have been good. But this is next-gen country, where the expectations are high. Developers need to bring their "A" games at all times—with the high cost of the PS3, anything less is insulting. | **Tom Byron**

VERDICT Purty graphics, awesome character design, neat weapons and combos can't save this one from itself.

score **4.5** | 10

HD ALERT

Warning: *Genji: Days of the Blade* MUST be played in HD only. Sure, it plays just fine on a standard set, but be warned that it *looks* like a PS2 game—not the show-off game that you may have hoped for.



PS3

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

Excelsior!

| pub. Activision dev. Raven
esrb T msrp $59.99

Quick: Do you know what the hell MODOK stands for? If you didn't immediately spew out "Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing!" then you might not feel the same geektastic glow of Marvel love that Raven has poured into *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*.

Gameplay is the bare minimum required of a sequel. More heroes, but fewer powers per hero (which is good, as they feel more unique), more streamlined RPG elements (autoleveling option plus no potions and limited inventory), team leveling (get bonuses for maintaining a consistent active hero roster) and decent but not eye-bleeding graphics. The PS3 version uses the tilt sensor for stuff like dodges, throws, and power amplifying (time a tilt right and your powers do extra damage/healing/coolness). But that's about it in terms of gameplay differences between this and *X-Men Legends II*.

MUA is fan service delivered to the nth degree. Okay, I realize there is no good reason for freakin' Moon Knight (a next-gen exclusive, along with Colossus) to join a coalition that counts Dr. Strange, Luke Cage, and Elektra among its ranks, but hey, I can have a team consisting of Moon Knight, Deadpool, Iron Man, and Ghost Rider, which is good enough for me. Besides the playable roster, *MUA* is bursting with bizarre and obscure cameos from both heroes and villains—loser villains like Attuma and Mysterio show up along with friendly folk like freakin' Wyatt Wingfoot and Lockjaw (a dog with a tuning fork on his head and the ability to create portals to teleport people around...how could it be you've never heard of him?).

If you don't care who Black Bolt, or the Super Skrull (or, well, any of the characters named herein) are, then the game is merely a very solid beat-em-up, but man, if you're a Marvel zombie like I am, this is the closest we can get to enacting a digital version of the Secret Wars. | **Thierry Nguyen**

THE HOUSE OF IDEAS Fantastic fan service via playable characters, fightable villains, and cameos all around
DISTINGUISHED COMPETITION Remove the fan service, and it's a solid (and slightly dumbed-down) action-RPG

score **7.5** | 10

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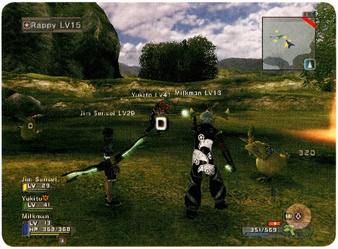

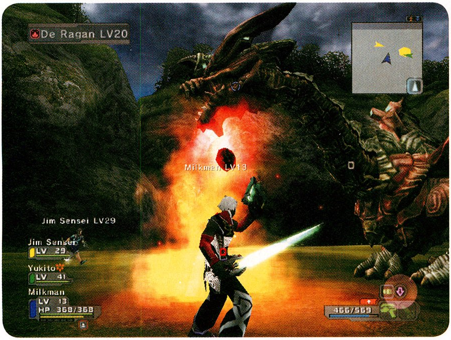

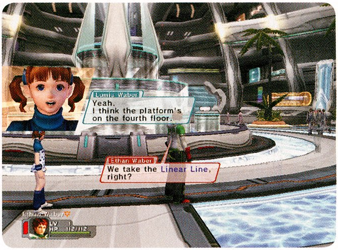
Lumia Waber
Yeah.
I think the platform's on the fourth floor.

Ethan Waber
We take the Linear Line, right?

Phantasy Star Universe

Just when you thought it was safe to go back into the Ethernet

pub. Sega dev. Sega
esrb T msrp $49.99

If you were one of the loyal PS2 owners who never owned a Dreamcast or a GameCube and, by association, *Phantasy Star Online*, consider yourself lucky; You preserved a hell of a lot of real-life hours not playing that highly addictive *Diablo*-style game. The problem now, though, is that *Phantasy Star Universe* is here, and despite its many flaws, is just as time consuming. *Phantasy Star Universe* brings the classic lineage to the PS2 for the first time, in both offline and online modes.

While the offline story mode is hardly perfect, with an awkward storytelling style (stilted dialogue and a paint-by-numbers script) that suggests no one at Sonic Team has ever heard of *Knights of the Old Republic* or *Oblivion* before. But what it lacks in polish and subtlety it makes up for in giving players hordes of monsters to fight, NPC allies to rally to your cause, partner machinery to raise and develop, items and weapons to synthesize, quests to unlock, and a diverse selection of battle styles to master. Unlike *PSO*, in which race types were relegated to specific job classes, in *PSU* different races can use varying job types, but specific races lend themselves better to specific jobs.

Once you've cleared chapter four of the story mode, a new option called extra mode opens up, which lets you create a customized character for use in an approximation of the online game, but offline and stored to your memory card. Unlike story mode, in which you're restricted to playing as Ethan Waber, the game's main character, in extra mode you're free to create the character of your choice. And since it's completely offline, no Internet connection is necessary. This may sound like a wasted effort, but the precedent was set with games like *Diablo II* on PC many years ago. But, provided you have a broadband connection, and are willing to toss down a monthly fee, that's when *PSU* really opens up.

While the launch phase of *PSU* limited players to specific online areas, by the time you read this most every area will be unlocked with more and more content added every month. Some players complain that it's unfair for certain online areas that are already on the disc to be blocked off, but considering *PSU* doesn't require a harddrive to play, a monthly fee seems pretty reasonable considering the server costs Sega has to maintain for players to cavort online. And once you're online, you'll see a thriving community of players to team up with and tackle the game's numerous missions and challenges with, all for the sake of collecting the coolest gear and the most powerful weapons. *PSU* might not be massively multiplayer, but it is absolutely worth investigation. **| James Mielke**

VERDICT An exceptionally solid action-RPG that grows better with extended playtime.

score 8 | 10

Unlike *PSO*, in which your character was stuck with the look you chose for it at the outset, you can change the color of your eyes, your hairstyle and color, skin color and clothing options at any point in the game. You also get a personal apartment that you can furnish and customize at your leisure (provided you have the in-game currency to pay for it). With each update, Sega plans to add more and more items and equipment too.

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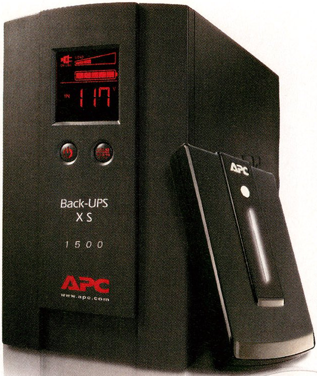

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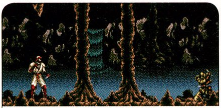


PS2

Sega Genesis Collection

Nostalgia never looked so...grainy

| pub. Sega Dev. Digital Eclipse
esrb E Msrp $19.99

Playing the *Sega Genesis Collection* will remind you of two things—one being that the Genesis was a great system that had equally great games and the second being that most of the games haven't aged well in the slightest. Fortunately, there's a pretty nice balance of good and not so good in this collection, so for every *Vectorman* there's a *Columns* to go along with it.

Indeed, there are plenty of games here worth revisiting and playing for some time. Vectorman and its sequel are prime examples, as are the two *Sonic* games—even though they've been included in just about every single collection known to man at this point. *Comix Zone* is another great game that has aged much better than any of the others, thanks in large part to its unique style and premise. In fact, it will make you want to see a sequel. The same goes for *Shinobi III*, one of the most excellent games featuring a ninja ever created. The accompanying ninja game, *Shadow Dancer*, is also pretty fun, but its mechanics aren't quite as polished as those in *Shinobi III*.

Additionally, there are a surprising number of RPGSs in the collection, ranging from one of the very first RPGs—*Sword of Vermillion*—to appear on the system to *Phantasy Star II, III,* and *IV*. The pattern of good and bad holds to them as well since *Vermilion* is incredibly clunky and archaic but the *Phantasy Star* games still retain that twinge of excellence that has kept the series around to this day.

For some of the other games, you'll be glad their lives started and ended on the Genesis. *Altered Beast* is simply terrible, and the aforementioned *Columns* is so abundantly boring that you will literally fall asleep while it's playing—though you still may manage to get a pretty decent score regardless. Still, for the most part, the better games in this collection outweigh the terrible ones and some still hold up quite well. **| Giancarlo Varanini**

PROS Good selection of games. *Virtua Fighter 2* isn't as bad as it looks.
CONS There are some real stinkers in this collection.

score 7 | 10

You should play the minigolf. It's great!

PS2 | PSP

Thrillville

Jack of all minigames, master of none

| pub. LucasArts Dev. Frontier
esrb E10+ Msrp $39.99

Management sims have always been a weakness of mine—especially the theme-park variety. There's something about building a space to provide joy to people that brings a glimmer of warmth to my black little heart. I have to admit, though, that I prefer the kinds of games that let you create rolling deathtraps. *Thrillville* doesn't, but it does offer one of the most intensely interactive sim/management games I've come across.

The real highlight of *Thrillville* is the vast selection of minigames, ranging from knock-offs of classic arcade games to minigolf, bumper cars, shooting galleries, and even a surprisingly substantial first-person shooter. As with any game that crams in a ton of different types of games, the selection is pretty uneven—the racing games, for example, well and truly suck—but there are enough standouts to keep you coming back to the minigames once you've beaten the main game.

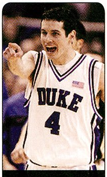
In fact, there are so many minigames that they really kind of dwarf the management aspect of *Thrillville*. This problem is abetted by the clunky menu interface. It appears to try to steer you much more heavily into the ground-level stuff. The result is that neither the ground-level activities nor the head-office management nor the ride-design elements feel as fleshed-out as they should be.

I also have to gripe about the unnecessarily restrictive three-section park design. Because of this, you're severely limited in what you can do with, say, coasters or racetracks; you can make something interesting if you're really creative and willing to invest some time, but after a few experiments you're likely to start going for the predesigned courses.

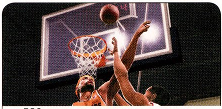
As for the PSP version, it's fundamentally the same game with different missions and objectives and what appear to be a few tweaks to the minigames to make them more compelling on the go. It's just as much fun to mess around with at first...and just as frustrating when you start running up against its limitations. **| Joe Rybicki**

VERDICT An unusually interactive management sim that suffers from trying to do a bit too much.

score 7 | 10



Cover athlete J.J. Redick isn't only the all-time leading Atlantic Coast Conference scorer while at Duke, he's also the all-time AAA point-getter in Virginia, scoring 2,215 point in his high school career.



PS2

College Hoops 2K7

The latest in College Hoops déjà vu

| pub. 2K Sports Dev. Visual Concepts
esrb E Msrp $19.99

Now that we've finally arrived in the PS3 era, iterative annual sports titles are slowing to a creative crawl on the PS2. The latest example is *College Hoops 2K7*, which should be titled *College Hoops 2K6½*. The game is smart to tease fans its way with its great price ($19.99, which is $10 cheaper than last year), but it features very little in the way of updates.

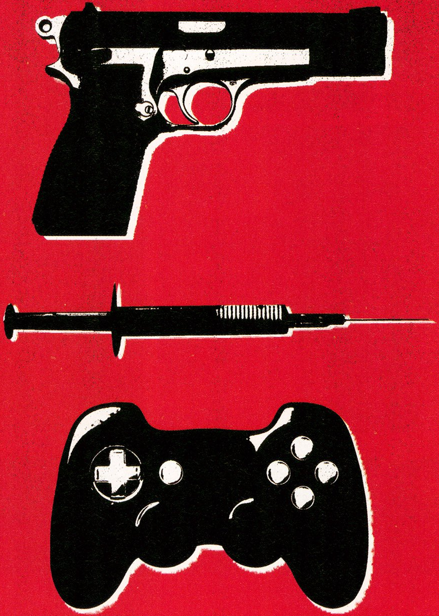
Even without the updates, the game does continue on its path as the top NCAA basketball game in the land. But then again, there's not much in the way of competition. (The main challenger, EA's *March Madness*, is looking to make a late season run to compete, since it's set to release when the real March Madness starts.)

The game's greatest asset is the same as any college game's greatest asset (if it's done right, and it is here): fans tearing at their skin to cheer on their team. Rivalry games, tournament games, close games, they're all met with howling fans who stomp, clap, serenade, and chant on the home team's behalf. The energy is awesome, enough to keep you struggling for buckets when you're down by 10 at home, or enough to motivate you to hush the crowd by launching up another nothing-but-net 3-ball. And it's all aided by amped up commentary to replace last year's generic-ish effort.

But of course, no game's atmosphere is going to win any awards on its own—as much fun as *Crowd Simulator 2K7* sounds. In the end, and you've heard this before: It's all up to the gameplay. You'll find much improved passing, as pressing Circle will keep your fast-break motoring with great lead passes. But there are too many blown buckets as the shot stick seems a bit inconsistent, especially right around the hoop (where players should be more willing to roll in a layup or go for a dunk). And iso-motion dribbling needs a dust-up as it requires too much studying to get it right. Another issue: too many steals! But all this will get fixed next year, of course. . . if you've got your PS3 by then. **| Todd Zuniga**

VERDICT Still the obvious choice for hardcore college hoops fans, particularly because there's no competition till March.

score 6.5 | 10



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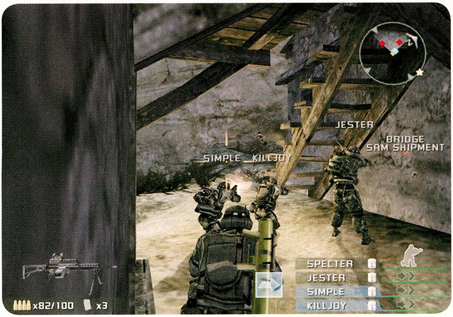
SPECTER
x5/30 x5

KILO
TobyN.201
73 m
S.Gibbons
ECHO
OCilento
TobyN.201
S.Gibbons
x30/30 x5

EXTRACTION
206 m
TobyN.201
JULIET
S.Gibbons
OCilento
TobyN.201
S.Gibbons
x144/150 x20
DISMOUNT



DELTA
S.Gibbons
ECHO
87 m
OCilento
TobyN.201
S.Gibbons
x6/30 x5

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault

The game that should have shipped in 2002 rocks out

| pub. Sony CEA dev Zipper Interactive
esrb T msrp $39.99

Anyone with a taste for military shooters should take this as a great time to get into *SOCOM*, because *Combined Assault* is the most user-friendly entry in this notoriously unapproachable series. And if you tried *SOCOM 1*, *2*, or *3* and hated it, there's a new element that might turn your opinion around: co-op.

SOCOM's graphics induce cringing, because they compare very poorly to the recent glut of Clancy shooters on the 360 (even if it's unfair to compare games from different systems). But *Combined Assault* looks as passable as *SOCOM 3*; it's also fully compatible with *SOCOM 3* and ships with all of *3*'s multiplayer maps, weapons, vehicles, and then some, meaning there's already a huge community to jump into and learn from. And even though the *SOCOM* community is a group of online-shooter fans—often a bit rude, often a bit high—it's really one of the best communities available. Spend even a little time on an unranked server and just ask things like "What should I do? What gun should I use?" and you'll find more help than you know what to do with.

Combined Assault features full four-person cooperative play through the entire single-player campaign, which means you finally don't have to spend as many hours screaming at the SEALs' AI as you do playing. Instead, you can scream at your friends for being idiots. Co-op runs as smoothly as the standard multiplayer, and pickup games of co-op Instant Action were already firing up on release day. It's nice to have a multiplayer option for people who don't want to see anyone victory-dance on their head ever again.

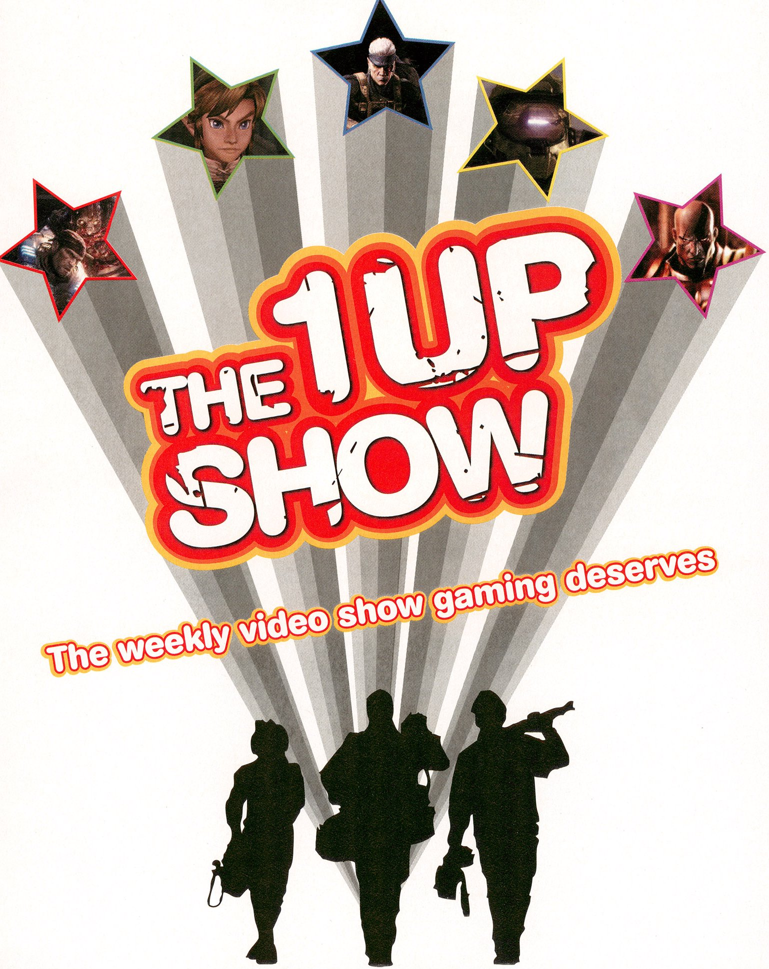
The campaign's story is nothing inspired, but it's the sort of fun that *SOCOM* has offered for years: Bust some bad guys, sneak by some bad guys, and save some good guys. The real kick comes from the excellent integration of Crosstalk, letting fulfilled bonus objectives in the PSP and PS2 versions provide mission aids, weapons, or online-appearance unlocks for the other system. Fireteam Bravo takes out a squad, and you have an easier approach—and you can actually watch Bravo pick off said squad as you approach. It's great to see the PS2/PSP interactivity actually being used, and used well.

The fatal flaw in *Combined Assault*—its soft underbelly for stupendous damage—is that it's being labeled as a full game, since the *SOCOM* series doesn't release "expansion packs." It's a great chunk of new maps and guns (and co-op!) for *SOCOM* fans, and it's as good a point as any for newcomers to try to penetrate the hardcore depths of the online community, no question. But with so many triple-A titles releasing for the PS2 as it retires gracefully—and so many stellar online military-themed shooters blowing away in the new generation—it's tough to swallow *Combined Assault* as a full retail package. **| Patrick Joynt**

VERDICT Another stand-up-and-salute *SOCOM* game, but co-op is the only standout addition.

score 8 | 10

TO BE A SEAL...
Work on your sidestroke
That boring, sort-of-silly
looking one, where you
basically have one hand
free? That's the one.
You'll be spending lots
of time dragging people,
mines, and whatnot
around in the water, so
nail that sidestroke. Oh,
and get a 7:20 mile time
SOCOM's online doesn't
seem so tough now,
does it?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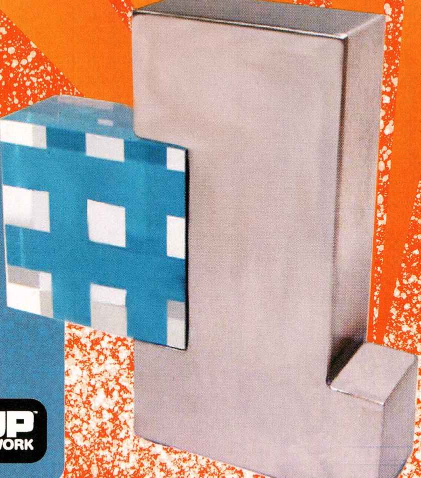

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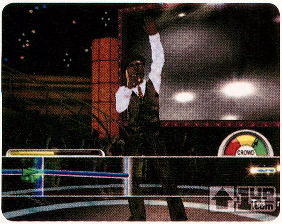
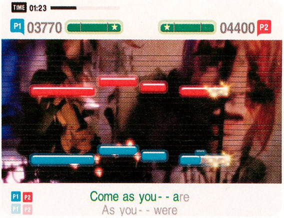
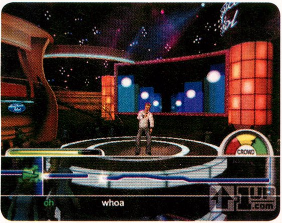
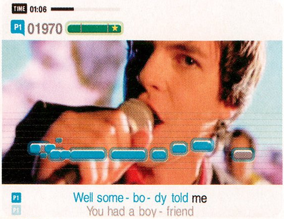








COMPATIBILITY ISSUES

The mics work only with their respective games: You can't use the *SingStar* mics with *Karaoke Revolution* or vice versa. Which sucks—how many microphones do you need cluttered among your game system? However, the two mics that come bundled with *SingStar* are compatible with the PS3, so you won't need to upgrade them along with the hardware.

PS2

Karaoke Revolution Presents:
American Idol

| pub. Konami dev. Blade
esrb E10+ msrp $39.99

PS2

Singstar Rocks

| pub. Sony CEA dev. Sony CEE
esrb E10+ msrp $49.99 (incl. 2 mics)

THE LOOK

Karaoke Revolution Presents:
American Idol

This is the same *Karaoke Revolution* look and feel that's been around since the first game—the only difference is the addition of virtual Randy, Simon, and "Laura," the as-close-as-they-could-get-without-crossing-over-a-legal-line clone of Paula Abdul. And they add nothing, unless you get a kick out of hearing Randy give lengthy generic comments peppered with a very liberal helping of "yo"s and "dawg"s. Which, trust me, after sitting through the spiel one or two times, you won't.

SingStar Rocks

It's nice to see games evolve into a better design aesthetic—*SingStar* offers a really modern, clean look that's easy to navigate. You get the music video as a background while you sing, which is infinitely more interesting than watching a cartoony digital avatar do awkward dance steps on stage. It's perfect if you've got non-videogame-playing friends that you don't want to heckle you about your immature hobby because it looks adults might actually play this game.

THE SONGS

Karaoke Revolution Presents:
American Idol

It's hard to satisfy all musical tastes, but *KRAI* does its best by again covering a wide range of general pop-dom, ranging from "Let's Stay Together" to "Heartbreaker" to "Stickwitu," with 40 titles in all, four of them unlockable. As before, the songs are covers of the originals, but they're done well, and it's nice being able to turn the lead singer all the way down if you don't want someone else getting in the way of your vocal stylings.

SingStar Rocks

A decent variety of tracks here as well (30 total), although they weigh more heavily on contemporary hipster end of the musical spectrum—some of which, you might argue, are not quite as karaoke-able (I got a sore throat from trying to imitate Jack White's rasping on "Blue Orchid"). *SingStar* uses the actual artist track, which is great, but it's a big bummer that the volume of the lead vocals is not adjustable, so you're singing with the lead singer instead of in his or her place. It's worth noting that the PS3 version (which will be out at some point in 2007) allows you buy individual song titles from the Sony Connect store, so if you're going to be upgrading your hardware anytime soon, you might want to wait for that version.

THE PERFORMANCE

Karaoke Revolution Presents:
American Idol

The addition of the *American Idol* license just means that the main single-player competition mode has the *American Idol* trappings on it, and you can also set up a multiplayer *Idol* competition with your buddies. All the rest of the modes make a repeat appearance, and there are a ton of unlockables to keep you playing, but it's too bad that only a few of them are songs—the others are mostly costumes, avatars, and videos. It'd be nice if *Karaoke Rev* took a cue from *Guitar Hero* and made unlocking the songs the game (like they did in *Karaoke Revolution Vol. 2*).

SingStar Rocks

There's no real "game" here for soloists, but the overall difficulty seems much harder, which I'd say is a good thing—it offers a new challenge for those of us who have mastered the art of humming our way to a batch of *Karaoke Revolution* diamond records. Overall, though, *SingStar* is best suited to being a party game; in addition to duets and battle modes, there's Pass the Mic, which sets up a customizable series of challenges that you compete in as teams.

THE RESULTS

Karaoke Revolution Presents:
American Idol

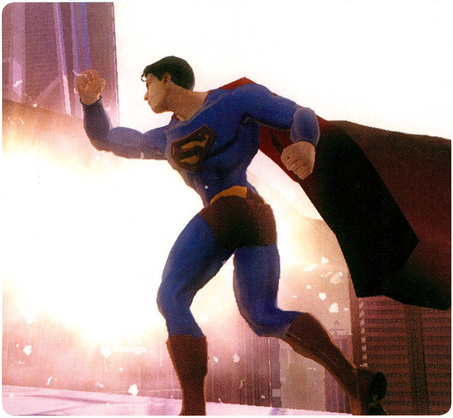
It's *Karaoke Revolution*—you know if you like this by now, but don't get it if you're looking for much more than just a new set of songs.

score 7 | 10

SingStar Rocks

It's great if your singing takes place mostly with a group of friends, but game-players and karaoke diehards are better off with *KRAI*.

score 7 | 10



PS2

Superman Returns

Great Caesar's Ghost! Another terrible Superman game!

| pub. EA Games dev. EA Tiburon
esrb T msrp $39.99

Of all the heroes who make the jump from four-color panels to million-color television screens, Superman is the one who's had the worst luck. His games tend to be sloppy action titles with little regard for his character (why can muggers beat him up?). With the release of *Superman Returns*, there was hope that a game would finally do it justice. It sounds like a great idea: a free-roaming sandbox version of Metropolis where Supes can fly around and use his powers for good.

But once you start playing, the great idea falls apart in reality. The first major warning sign is that, though Metropolis is pretty big and open to explore, it looks less like the City of Tomorrow and more like the City of to be Completed Someday. Metropolis' flat and often untextured buildings, combined with the fact that all the buildings look the same and the only distinguishing landmark is the Daily Planet [building?] itself, makes the overall game look and feel more like a premature release rather than a delayed one. The concept of having the traditional life bar measure Metropolis instead of Superman is great, but it's hard to feel like a city's proud defender when said city has absolutely no soul.

Additionally, the actual missions simply make very little sense most of the time. Yes, in a universe where the color of the sun affects the physique of a humanoid alien, the missions are real headscratchers. Sure, Metallo using robots to wreak havoc makes sense. Yet, long after I stop Metallo, why do his robots suddenly pop up to hang out with ice-breathing dragons? Why am I fighting so many dragons in the first place? If you thought *Spider-Man 2* got repetitive, well, foiled robberies and pizza deliveries are almost liberating compared to the numerous times you fight weird made-up monsters that have no context for their anger or existence. Superman fans will feel even more incensed when the extent of the lore in the game is: boss battles with Metallo, Bizarro, Riot, and Mongol, and cut-scenes with Mr. Mxyzptlk and Lex Luthor. Yes, Supes' most notorious villain is just seen in cut-scenes, making him one of gaming's most infuriating teases.

No matter how good some of the game concepts are, the mere fact that a basic element such as the main villain not even deigning to make an in-game appearance, among other things, demonstrates that the Superman curse is alive and well. **| Thierry Nguyen**

SUPERMAN Er, the concept of using Superman and his full slate of powers to protect Metropolis, and a mode where you play as Bizarro and try to destroy as much as you can.
BIZARRO Everything else, such as graphics and gameplay

score 3.5 | 10

ME AM HERO

The best part of *Superman Returns* is easily the unlockable Bizarro mini-game. Since Superman spends the entire game trying to protect the fragile glass that is Metropolis, it's satisfying to just get unhinged and help Bizarro tear up Metropolis within a time limit. Alas, Bizarro also cannot pick people up and drop them from above. Sigh.

167 / 170
19 HIT!

PS2

Naruto: Uzumaki Chronicles

In this exciting episode, watch Naruto mow the lawn!

| pub. Namco Bandai dev. Cavia
esrb T msrp $39.99

OK, let's say you're a developer tasked with turning the popular anime franchise *Naruto*—for the uninitiated, it's essentially *Dragon Ball Z* with ninjas—into a mission-based action-RPG. You've got a cast of eclectic characters and an arsenal of ninja badassery at your disposal. What's the best way to turn that into a compelling game? The correct answer, apparently, is "gather dolls, deliver foodstuffs from town to town, and pick flowers." Yes, pick flowers. Ninjas everywhere just poured out 40s for *Naruto*'s street cred.

Insipid tasks aside, *Uzumaki Chronicles*' biggest failing is that it's just not very fair. Success depends largely on earning power-ups from missions, but you only get one shot at passing. The idiocy of this is illustrated in a mission where you've got to train Naruto's young admirer in the art of ninjutsu. Naruto mentions that when he was a trainee, it took him three tries to pass this particular test. So, er, why does the player only get one chance? This ends up leading to a lot of empty gameplay, as you've got to head back to your home base in Hidden Leaf Village and endure inane, unskippable cut-scenes if you want to try missions again. Naruto himself drags things out even more by shuffling across the Final Fantasy Tactics–esque world map not at the speed of a Japanese ninja, but of a Japanese nonagenarian.

The real shame about *Uzumaki Chronicles* is that the gameplay really isn't that bad—Naruto's move set is a bit limited, and combat can get rather repetitive, but the potential for a good game was definitely there. Unfortunately, developer Cavia chose to spotlight the more mundane aspects of life in Hidden Leaf Village. It'd be like making a Dragon Ball game where Goku and Piccolo get their driver's licenses—it may have been an entertaining diversion in the manga, but do you really want to base a game around it? **| Andrew Fitch**

VERDICT The kiss of death for anime fans: It's the gaming equivalent of a filler episode.

score 5.5 | 10

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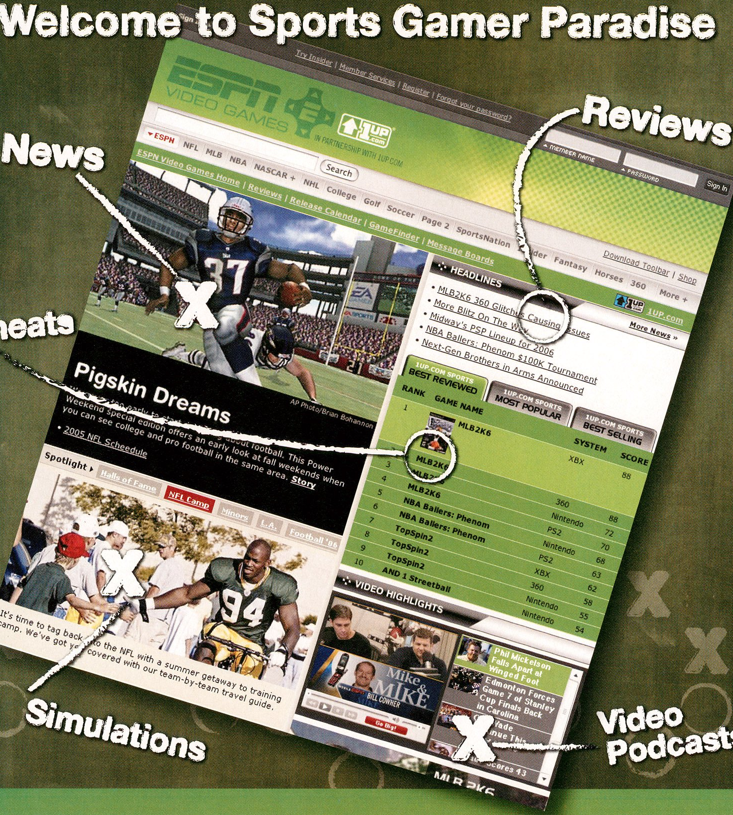

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Pigskin Dreams

AP Photo/Brian Bohannon

It's not too early to start thinking about football. This Power Weekend special edition offers an early look at fall weekends when you can see college and pro football in the same area. Story

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4	MLB2K6	PS2	70
5	NBA Ballers: Phenom	Nintendo	68
6	NBA Ballers: Phenom	PS2	63
7	TopSpin2	XBX	62
8	TopSpin2	360	58
9	TopSpin2	Nintendo	55
10	AND 1 Streetball	Nintendo	54

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BILL COWHER

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Edmonton Forces Game 7 of Stanley Cup Finals Back in Carolina

Wade

Scores 43

MLB 2K6

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PS2

Reservoir Dogs

How do you make a game of a movie about talking?

| pub. Eidos dev. Volatile Games
esrb M msrp $29.99

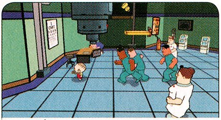
"How long are you going to keep this up?" "You gonna do this all day?" "You done yet? 'Cause I sure am." I feel you, hostages in *Reservoir Dogs*. I don't want to grab yet another mall rat, SWAT-team member, or rent-a-cop and watch their "tolerance" tick down as I pistol-whip them to make cops drop their guns. I certainly don't want to desperately dash from one used-up hostage to another, holding them in front of me as a human shield for another few minutes of shuffling through a level. And after the initial thrill of playing as stone-cold psycho Mr. Blonde—licensed voice, likeness, and all—I even realized that I didn't want to kill any more cops.

Sadly, those are your only choices, measured at the levels of "Professional" or "Psycho." Plod through levels, grabbing human shields like power-ups, or else plow through levels and cop after cop after cop... after cop. For variety's sake, you can add in the occasional bystander as well. The pistols, rifles, machine guns, shotguns, and grenades allow you to leave fairly well-depicted gore all over the various levels to mark where you met a shopper, a mall cop, or the local PD. By making individually shocking, interesting moments—like playing someone who ends up on the wrong side of a gun from the PD—the entire focus of the game, the developers make those moments dull and worn.

The gunplay itself is no more than an ugly, blocky third-rate third-person shooter, aping *Max Payne* without knowing what made the game great. The on-foot action's great compared to the driving sequences, though, which boast physics and graphics that feel like an early *Grand Theft Auto III* rip-off. Not nearly the sum of the parts it mimics, *Reservoir Dogs* answers some questions for fans of the film, but it just isn't worth the time. | **Patrick Joynt**

VERDICT Unless you're a rabid *Reservoir Dogs* fan, pick up the DVD, *Max Payne*, and *GTA3* instead.

score 3 | 10



PS2 | PSP

Family Guy

All the things that make us laugh and cry...and cry and cry

| pub. 2K Games dev. High Voltage
esrb M msrp $29.99

I'm a *Family Guy* fan. There's something so gloriously wrong about the show's psychotic characters and so deliciously right about the constant non-sequitur interludes that routinely nail the pop culture icons of my generation. So even though I knew that the *Family Guy* videogame was likely to be little more than a cheap attempt to cash in on the show's success, I was mildly excited to play it.

And you know what? It really *is* little more than a cheap attempt to cash in on the show's success. The gameplay is divided into three distinct areas: Stewie's tedious platform/shooting segments, Brian's tedious stealth segments, and Peter's tedious roaming-brawler segments. Stewie's sections are probably the most palatable, simply for variety's sake: The designers throw in the occasional homage to classic arcade games (e.g., *Space Invaders* or *Centipede*) and mix things up with the shooting and the jumping. Peter's and Brian's segments, on the other hand, keep dipping into the same well, providing little more than scenery changes from time to time.

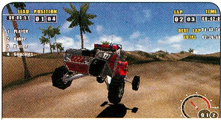
But you know what? In spite of all that, the game's still pretty entertaining for fans of the show, and that's due almost entirely to the voice work. The game features the full cast of the show, and these folks deliver gags that are often reused from various episodes, but still usually worth a laugh, and occasionally entirely new and ridiculously funny.

Trouble is, the designers seem to be unaware of the fact that occasionally the player may die and be forced to restart an area...and listen to the same, unskippable, longwinded intro each time. Note to developers of funny games: I don't care how funny it is; the third or fourth time you hear it, it is no longer funny.

Even so, it's hard to completely hate a game that includes a minigame with the following instructions: "We couldn't afford another minigame, so...uh...how about pressing a button? Yeah...do that." | **Joe Rybicki**

FREAKIN' SWEET! The use of the full cast of the show makes it every bit as funny as the show itself.
EVIL MONKEY The gameplay is, at best, boring as hell.

score 5 | 10



PS2

ATV Offroad Fury 4

The Mud Gods might approve, but they're still disappointed

| pub. SCEA dev. Climax Studios
esrb M msrp $39.99

The *ATV* series has been playing catch-up for the last few rounds of mud-slinging between it and rival franchise *MX vs. ATV*. The rivalry isn't helped by the fact that *MX* is made by the same people who made the first two *ATV Offroad* games, nor does it help that the *MX* series always seems to be first to the punch with things like multiple types of vehicles. Climax, however, has not only incorporated buggies, trucks, and motocross bikes into this version of the game, but they're actually fun to drive around in as well. The new vehicles all add a unique flavor to the game's formula, and they're integrated better than in their rival series. Unfortunately, the other big new feature—the single-player story mode—is a symptom of the biggest problem with *ATV Offroad Fury 4*: It all feels like its been done before.

The tracks are sharply designed and, although we're not talking about *Gran Turismo* levels of visual quality, they're also pretty sharp looking. Race against some skilled players and you'll feel the competition for the winding paths you can choose to take, and if you slide off course or slam into a hay bale divider, it's definitely going to be your fault. Learn how to drive a buggy in water, man, because the controls and physics are reliable and precise. You can also spend some more time upgrading your ride or practicing on a custom-made course from the robust course editor. Just like *ATV Offroad Fury 3*, there's a lot to do on this disc, and it's very well done.

And that's 4. If you picked up the last *MX vs. ATV* you've seen the new vehicles; if you can read at an eighth-grade level you know the story. The game isn't a bad addition to the series, but it feels like an expansion at a sequel price. | **Patrick Joynt**

CROSS PLATFORM

Of course, one of the perks of Offroad Fury 4 is that it features tremendous compatibility with its PSP sibling, Offroad Fury Pro. Design courses on either version and race them on the other, swap info on leaderboards that both games share, and generally enjoy having spent $80 to get the whole experience.

VERDICT Loyal *Offroad Fury* fans were probably good with the wait, but everyone else gets a well-executed if dull sequel.

score 7 | 10

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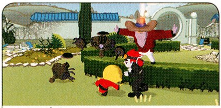
Illustration: Karen Chu

KIDS Roundup



PS2 | PSP

Xiaolin Showdown

Zen and the Art of Button Mashing

| pub. Konami dev. BottleRocket
esrb E10+ msrp $29.99

It seems as though cartoon-based kids' games come in one of two flavors—3D fighting contests or generic 3D platformers. Generally, the Japanese anime stuff comprises most of the fighting games, while the platformers are more along the line of Western licenses such as *SpongeBob and Scooby-Doo*. *Xiaolin Showdown* tries to do a bit of both, mixing standard fighting with gigantic levels and bonus areas that feature some platforming elements. It's basically *Power Stone* or *Super Smash Bros*. with bonus stages.

You play as one of four Xiaolin monks in search of the Shen Gong Wu, or "mystical power-ups." Of course, your enemies are doing the same, so you and your friends have to fight off wave after wave of their nondescript grunts while combing the battlefield for various power-ups.

That's the game in a nutshell, and it's every bit as boring as it sounds. The problem lies in the gameplay, which has about as much depth as Paris Hilton. Although you can take control of four characters, they all play pretty much the same. You just spend what seems like forever in most levels trying to pummel nondescript enemies, all the while hoping your friends don't start beating you up instead—yes, it's possible to get caught up in an attack by one of your comrades. This isn't the first beat-em-up to feature friendly fire, but it's particularly annoying here when you consider that some of the special moves incapacitate you for a really, really long time.

Things get even worse on the PSP version of the game. Not because it's different in any noticeable way, but because the characters are pretty tiny on the PS2 to begin with, and no one thought to zoom the camera in a bit on the portable system. The result is that it's very difficult to even see what's happening on the screen most of the time, especially when a crowd of combatants forms.

Xiaolin Showdown has the elements of a good game, but the execution is so sloppy that it ends up falling flat. **| Greg Sewart**

VERDICT Another mindless, boring cartoon-based fighting game graces the PlayStation consoles.

score 4.5 | 10

PS2 | PSP

Avatar: The Last Airbender

Action-RPGs for the under-10 set

| pub. THQ dev. THQ
esrb E10+ msrp $39.99

***Avatar* attempts** to do something a bit different from the standard cartoon action/fighting fare by presenting the story of Aang and his friends as a top-down action game with RPG elements, kind of like Activision's *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*.

The areas you'll traverse are sort of open-ended, which is a nice touch. Defeating enemies gains you points, which can be spent on earning up to four different special moves per character, of which there are also four. Because of all of this, the game starts out really strong.

But then you earn those four moves per character fairly early on in the game, and you discover that the four different characters you're playing are pretty much interchangeable, kind of defeating the whole purpose of a party system. And from that point on, the game just starts to grind.

Perhaps the biggest bummer, though, is that the game doesn't include any multiplayer co-op option. This would be the perfect title to fight through with a friend, but unfortunately, you'll have to go it alone.

The PSP version plays pretty much the same, with a few slight differences. First of all, your party is restricted to two players (out of a possible four), and your special abilities are all available from the start, though you can still upgrade them based on experience gained.

Even more problems plague the portable *Avatar*, though. Most irritating of these is the long, frequent load times one has to suffer through while exploring the game world. Apparently the wide-open world idea doesn't work so well on the PSP, and so it's been broken down into much smaller chunks, each of which has to be loaded as you explore. It's annoying and actually a little disorienting, making it easy to get lost.

Avatar shows flashes of brilliance at first, but sadly those don't last long enough to sustain the entire game. **| Greg Sewart**

VERDICT A decent attempt at an action-RPG featuring popular cartoon characters that doesn't quite live up to its potential.

score 6 | 10

PS2

The Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning

New Beginning, Same Old Problem-

| pub. Sierra dev. Krome Studios
esrb E10+ msrp $39.99

Spyro's been through some rough times on the PlayStation 2, coming off a string of hit games on the PS1 to nothing but generic junk on the PS2. And while *A New Beginning* represents Vivendi Universal's first stab at rekindling the Spyro fire—they obviously spent money on this one, as is evident by a cast that includes Gary Oldman and Elijah Wood—the game does little to reverse the downward slide the franchise has been on over the past couple years.

The Legend of Spyro is an ambitious game, featuring giant—if clichéd—levels, a pseudo-RPG leveling system, and an epic story. But it's all so horribly generic at the same time. For example, the levels aren't big in a good way. Move to one area, fight waves of enemies that seem to spawn forever with Spyro's very limited fighting ability, wrestle with the camera a bit, move on, and do it all over again.

And the platforming elements aren't much better. In fact, they're downright confusing after you've gone through the first horribly mundane aerial shooter level in the game. So let me get this straight...Spyro can fly between two different places that are miles apart, but he can't flap those little wings to get over a small gap within another level or save himself from falling to his doom when he does try to make a large-ish leap?

The voice acting, while good, is hampered by a plodding script. The comic relief, provided by David Spade, is cut off at the knees thanks to the E rating, and the characters have a tendency to overexplain everything. The cinemas move along about as slowly as the rest of the game. It gets annoying after a very short time.

Spyro is a case of overdesign. Just about everything that has worked in other recent action-platformers is here in some form. The mechanics just don't come together well enough to form a cohesive experience, oftentimes getting in the way of each other (such as the whole flying/not being able to fly situation). *A New Beginning* is a step in the right direction, but Spyro still has a long way to go before being "good" again. **| Greg Sewart**

VERDICT Better than the last couple of *Spyro* games, but that's not really a glowing recommendation.

score 5 | 10

GLORY DAYS

It's almost hard to believe that eight years ago *Spyro* was one of the most promising action/platforming series on the PlayStation. What happened, you ask? Well, the first three games were developed by Insomniac Games (*Ratchet & Clank*, *Resistance*). Then Vivendi Universal took over the license and everything went to pot. Draw your own conclusions.

MOUTHS OF BABES

Just as series creator Charles M. Schulz insisted that children voice the animated Peanuts gang on his TV specials (e.g., *A Charlie Brown Christmas*), Namco Bandai has used children to voice the gang in *Snoopy vs. The Red Baron*. The result is the same as those venerable television specials—somewhat stuttering delivery that feels and sounds completely authentic. It's a nice touch.

PS2 | PSP

Snoopy vs. the Red Baron

Suddenly, a shot rang out!

| pub. Namco Bandai Games dev. Smart Bomb
esrb E10+ msrp $29.99

Could this be the perfect kids' license? The Peanuts gang is cute and cuddly enough for any little one to immediately love them, while parents probably grew up reading Charles Schulz's comic strips. And the game focuses on one of the most enduring images of the strip—Snoopy sitting atop his doghouse as the famous World War I flying ace, locked in combat with the nefarious Red Baron.

But parents shouldn't worry about the violence quotient. Even though the game involves shooting down enemy planes, the pilots will parachute to safety 100 percent of the time and most of the weapons are of the firecracker/potato-launcher variety. After all, this is taking place within a beagle's overactive imagination.

The dog fighting action (pun intended) is solid in Snoopy's game. The controls are smart and simple, no requiring any arcane lock-on setup or weapon micromanagement. Snoopy's Sopwith Camel can turn on a dime, speed up and slow down pretty much at will, and is generally a joy to fly. Even the various objectives are simple to understand.

The visuals, for the most part, get the job done nicely, too. These are fantasy worlds, but you'll see familiar landmarks all over the place—like the Eiffel Tower in the opening levels and such. Snoopy and his pal Woodstock also look great, though the rest of the Peanuts gang looks frightening in full 3D. Thankfully most interactions with Lucy, Charlie Brown, Linus, et cetera are done through 2D overlays.

I only have one big problem with the game, and that's the wildly spiking difficulty level. From one mission to the next, the difficulty goes all over the place. The game is much too hard for a younger player to get through, but still doesn't offer the challenge required for an older gamer to enjoy the entire experience. So yeah, if your kids are gonna play this, make sure you play it with them.

And you don't even need to tie up the family television to do it. *Snoopy* on the PSP is pretty much the exact same game, with all the same features. **| Greg Sewart**

VERDICT Great aerial combat with kid-friendly content and controls. The Peanuts gang is lookin' great.

score 7.5 | 10

PSP

Disney's Chicken Little: Ace in Action

| pub. Buena Vista Games dev. Avalance
esrb E10+ msrp $29.99

Don't expect to play as Chicken or his pals in this neat little action game. In his own words, "It's the game loosely based on the movie that was even more loosely based on our lives." Basically, it's an excuse to license a decent original action game. *Ace in Action* features three different play styles—in-flight shooter, tank shooter, and on-foot action/platformer. They're all solid and they're all fun, with just the perfect difficulty curve for the younger set, while featuring enough challenge and mass destruction to keep the parents' interest. Plus the commentary from the *Chicken Little* cast as they "play" the game keeps the mood nice and light. **| Greg Sewart**

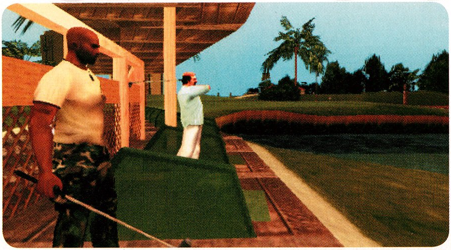
score 7.5 | 10

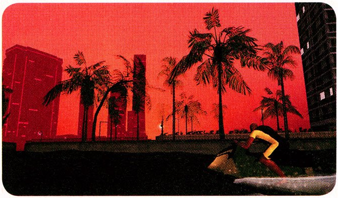
The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy

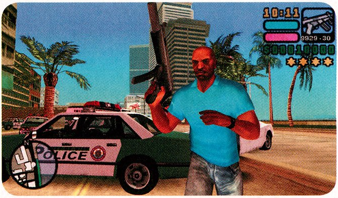
| pub. Midway dev. High Voltage Software
esrb E 10+ msrp $29.99

At first glance, *Billy & Mandy* looks like yet another of those endless anime-inspired 3D fighting games from Bandai, albeit with better graphics. However, diving deeper into the bizarre mayhem that is Billy and Mandy's world uncovers a surprisingly enjoyable homage to the *Power Stone* games for the Dreamcast and, more recently, the PSP. This is a kids' game, of course, so don't expect a lot of depth. But it stays interesting thanks to the arenas, which are constantly changing—for example, destroy too many columns in the Egypt level and the whole place comes crashing down around our fighters. Definitely a good time for the elementary-school set. **| Greg Sewart**

score 3 | 10







Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

Pushing the limits of the PSP even further

| pub. Rockstar dev Rockstar
esrb M msrp $39.99

Vice City Stories impresses in much the same way that last year's Liberty City Stories did. It's jaw-dropping to consider that an experience like this has been squeezed down to fit onto a handheld platform. Before we tackle all the good stuff that justifies the sizeable score at the bottom of the page though, we need to talk about what hasn't been addressed; the controls. It's shocking that Rockstar is so steadfast when it comes to something that endures such derision every year. While there's probably ample evidence that tweaks have been made, broadly speaking it's still the same haphazard lock-on mechanic that we've bitched about (but grudgingly tolerated) for years. As ever, it doesn't ruin the overall experience—but it's still a frustrating combination of game and hardware conspiring against you.

What of the improvements though? Most significant is probably that the presentation is even better. The graphics are more detailed, the draw distance noticeably enhanced, the animation better, the soundtrack superior, and the voice acting more prolific. Whereas *LCS* was a chopped-up, more easily consumable series of mini-experiences, *VCS* sees a return to a more natural-feeling flow from objective to objective, although with this comes the added frustration of having to go all the way back to the beginning of something more convoluted if you fail.

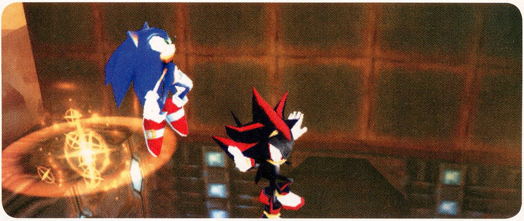
There are more vehicles this time, including helicopters, motorcycles, and Jet Skis, and more side quests and minigames that make the basic taxi-driver stuff look like a shallow afterthought. Running alongside the main storyline is an empire-building element that allows you to purchase and run businesses, much as you did in the original *Vice City*. Wholesome activities like prostitution, drug trafficking, and smuggling can be managed to boost your income, and these businesses also prompt additional side missions that take you on further diversions from the core story. In short, there's a lot of value to this game, thanks to the volume of gameplay on offer, and it's all supplemented with friendlier features that you'll instantly wish were in all *GTA* games. If you get killed, you have the option to purchase your weapons back, and the trip skip from *San Andreas* makes a welcome return, too.

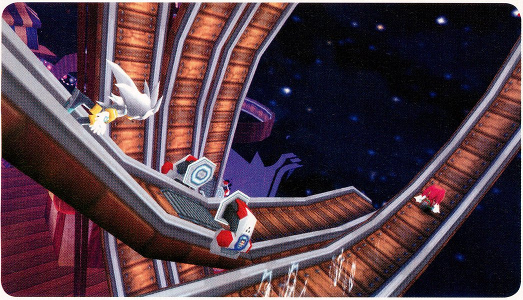
Those of you who tried the multiplayer modes in *LCS* will be disappointed to learn that those offered here are no better. While the ideas are certainly imaginative, the game tends to use the scale of the city too much, and it results in up to six people grudgingly traversing huge areas of the map to complete objectives. In short, it seems like just an afterthought. Again.

Like last year's game, *VCS* impresses like few other games on PSP. While it's not perfect, the value it represents and the quality of the story and execution outweigh the problems that the franchise still suffers from. **| John Davison**

VERDICT A refinement and expansion of last year's game, now with Phil Collins tunes.

score 9 | 10





Sonic Rivals

Are we done yet?

| pub. Sega dev. Backbone Entertainment
esrb E msrp $39.99

Our favorite spikey-haired blue hedgehog is back and going through some kind of inferiority complex. He's challenging all the other loveable characters, such as Knuckles and Shadow, to a showdown to prove once and for all that he's the fastest one... damnit.

It'll all seem familiar at first and have you smiling at the nostalgic platformer with the loopty-loops and rings, while the camera does something fancy once in awhile by swooping around and panning out. Then you find yourself getting giddy as you catapult around and then ride a leaf or whatever. You bounce around to make sure you don't fall off the cliffs. There's still plenty of time on the clock and you reach the end of the stage—happy that you made it across the dangerous terrain and... Oh, sorry but the other cute rodent dude totally got across the finish line much faster than you. You maybe in second place, but you fail because this ain't the Special Olympics, pal.

Welcome to Sonic Hell, where it feels like you're stuck in Rome and some gladiator prisoner that is being forced to compete mercilessly non-stop with other combatants. And instead of being rewarded with the hopes of freedom from the painful and grueling competition, once you pass a few stages, you get a few trading cards to play with for multiplayer. I'm only guessing this is so when you decide to play with your so-called "friend" wirelessly, you have something to bribe them with when you can no longer handle the frustrations alone.

The booby traps and other platformer obstacles are teeth-grindingly aggravating when you need to be one step ahead of your opponent. You can grab some power-ups and hit them with the elements like Captain Planet (burn them, make their screen look watery), but you'll be too focused on not falling into holes. And it's not like you'll be jumping around that often in *Sonic Rivals*. I wish this game loved me as much as it loved the right button on my PSP because that's all you'll be pressing a majority of the time. I found myself just memorizing the stage. Afterwards, you get a boss fight. And you'll clap when you see a companion helping you defeat it. However, the game isn't called *Sonic Playtime Party*, you have to hit the boss more times than your little rival—ridiculously showing us that the game isn't going to work with you even at the very end. **| James Lee**

VERDICT ***Sonic Rivals*** **hates you and treats you like an enemy.**

score **3** | 10

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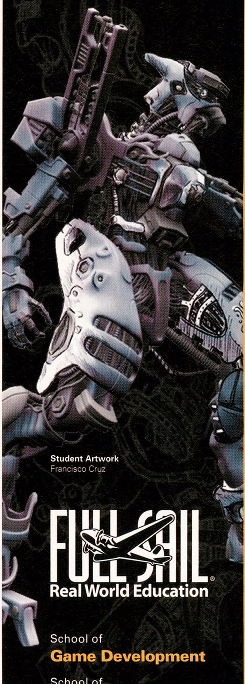

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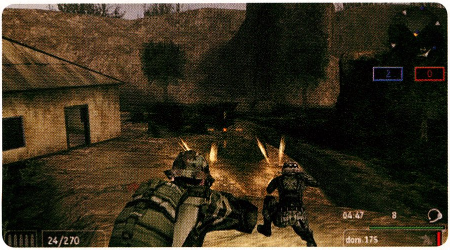
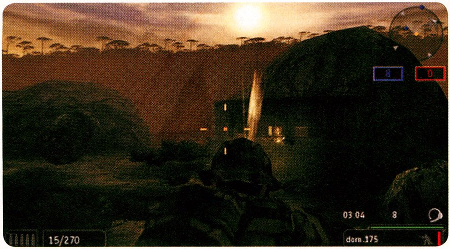




PSP

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo 2

Precise, careful changes create an even better SOCOM

| pub. SCEA dev. Zipper Interactive
esrb T msrp $39.99

Take a lesson from Zipper in how to create a sequel. For *Fireteam Bravo 2*, the developer took the core of *Fireteam Bravo*, added and corrected some things, and then carefully *didn't screw anything up*. It may not be a revolutionary set of changes, but the first title didn't need a revolution.

The single-player campaign is entertaining Tom Clancy–style stuff, with missions still planned out so you can finish a few on a long bus ride. It adds Command Equity (CE) and Local Influence (LI) rewards for playing certain ways. Fulfilling objectives and playing well earns CE, while focusing on nonlethal takedowns and saving hostages grants LI.

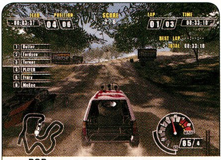
You can spend CE to unlock single-player weapons, gear, airstrikes, and resupplies, but you also spend them to unlock customization options in multiplayer. LI lets you access things like repeating crossbows and helpful (not critical, but helpful) intel as the locals come to trust you. These work so well because they reward you for playing the way you like, and you get better at playing that way. LI gear tends to be sneaky, while CE grants airstrikes and grenades.

Though customization of the interface would have been an awesome change, Zipper has inserted a quick-turn button to the mix. While this is of moderate value in the single-player, in multiplayer it's huge. Multiplayer has added some maps, some modes, but most importantly, is still a huge ad-hoc or infrastructure mess of fun. Game sharing is included, so friends get a chance to dive in for free.

This title raises the bar for quality and polish for games on the PSP today. Another incremental sequel won't be as welcome a year from now, but *Fireteam Bravo 2* just plain kicks ass. | **Patrick Joynt**

VERDICT Until we see a well-executed *Half-Life* on the PSP, this is the bar to aim for.

score 10 | 10



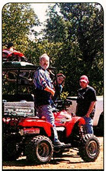
PSP

ATV Offroad Fury Pro

| pub. SCEA dev. Climax Studios
esrb M msrp $39.99

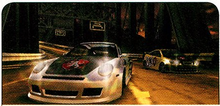
Pretend this is the first *ATV Offroad Fury* game for your PSP, and you'll be fine. Which should be easy—this game is too good to be related to *Blazin' Trails*. The controls feel like they were done by the same team that did the rest of the series: They're precise, tight, and accurate. Handling works well as a result, and your input will equal exactly what you want it to onscreen—at least within the limits of your ability to keep your vehicles on course. The lack of a single-player story makes the kitchen-sink-too number of events feel disjointed, but they're good regardless. In fact, with the track tuning for PSP-sized bites, this is superior to the PS2's current *ATV Offroad Fury 4*. | **Patrick Joynt**

score 8 | 10



HOW TO STAY OCCUPIED

The PSP version features extensive back-and-forth with the PS2 version. Make your courses and do your chatting on the PS2, and then compete on your PSP as you ride the bus to an actual ATV event. Where someone will probably steal your PSP.



PSP

Need for Speed Carbon: Own the City

| pub. EA Games dev. EA Canada
esrb E 10+ msrp $39.99

Every *NFS* game thus far on the PSP has looked and felt pretty much the same and none of them were all that good. Thankfully, *Own the City* breaks that cycle, if only a little bit. The game introduces a few bits featured in the console versions in the form of "wingmen" that you can take into certain races with you to perform various tasks such as blocking or taking out other drivers. It also features what looks like a new—or at least overhauled—graphics and physics engine. This is the most fun game in the PSP series purely from a control and competition standpoint, and it's overall a step in the right direction for a series that has been stuck in a major rut. | **Greg Sewart**

score 7 | 10

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Snakes on a Plane

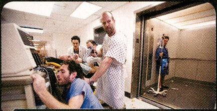
Super-serious, not super-fun by John Scalzi

Snakes on a Plane, as you all no doubt know by now, was the film that teh Intarweebs went totally nuts for, on the basis of the title and the fact that Samuel L. Jackson was the star. "*Snakes on a Plane*! That's hilarious!" said teh Intarweebs, and spent several months amusing itself with various fake trailers on YouTube, making Photoshopped pictures of snakes on other unlikely conveyances and having fake Jacksons say that they wanted those motherf***ing snakes off the motherf***ing plane. New Line Pictures, thrilled at all the enthusiasm, actually paid for additional shooting so that the real Sam Jackson could say that line. Because teh Intarweebs demanded it!

And then opening weekend came, and *Snakes on a Plane* made a really underwhelming $14 million on its way to a $33 million overall box office. And the movie studio people were asking, "But what about teh Intarweebs? Why didn't it come out to the movie theaters after all we did for it?" The response: Silly movie studios! Teh Intarweebs didn't actually care about the movie. It was never about the movie. Teh Intarweebs only cares about amusing itself. And anyway, what? You expect teh Intarweebs to leave the house? That's just crazy talk. The lesson for movie marketers: Don't trust teh Intarweebs to get butts in theater seats. It ain't gonna happen.

Lost in all this drama—naturally—was the film itself, which is what it always really was: a slam-bam, unpretentious late-summer screen filler with just enough Samuel L. Jackson to make it move along tolerably. It's maybe just a little smarter than you would have expected, but only a little. As Jackson himself said at the beginning of all the insanity, the title says it all. Either you want to see it or you don't. And if you do, it's a pretty decent time-waster. Too bad teh Intarweebs missed it.

score 7 | 10



Crank

Jason Statham, Amy Smart

Like Jean Claude Van Damme and Chuck Norris before him, Jason Statham has become the go-to guy for second-tier action goodness, the sort of films that get made for about a third of the cost of real action films. *Crank* is classic Statham: fast-moving, action-filled, largely ridiculous, and a hell of a lot of fun to watch. And it even has a bit of style, which is more than Van Damme or Norris ever managed.

score 6 | 10

SNL SEASON ONE

John Belushi, Chevy Chase

It's been 31 years since the debut of *Saturday Night Live*, which means that a teenage kid watching this DVD collection of the first season of the show will have more or less the same sort of experience with it as a teenager in 1975 might have had watching *Your Show of Shows*. Will they watch and go, "Man, this is genius"? Or will they go, "This sucks! Get me more *Robot Chicken*!"? I think it could go either way. But for comedy archaeologists, this collection is the mother lode. It's clear *Saturday Night Live* was still figuring itself out, but it's also equally clear that this sort of "throw everything at the wall, see what sticks" sort of sketch comedy was exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. Even now it feels ever-so-slightly dangerous. See this for the cultural watermark it is.

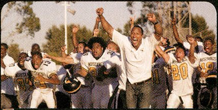
score 9 | 10

Doctor Who: The Complete Second Series

David Tennant, Billie Piper

The Doctor has been regenerated yet again (as he's able to so the BBC has a convenient excuse for dropping new actors into the role who look nothing like the old actors), and this time the Doctor is younger than I am. I want to kill myself. Old fans can geek out to the return of the Cybermen; new fans are reminded that Billie Piper is damn hot. Everyone wins.

score 7 | 10



Gridiron Gang

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Xzibit

The Rock is getting serious about the acting thing—you can tell because he's starting to use his own name in films. And good for him. He's been in some lousy films, but Johnson's got presence, and as the coach who inspires a bunch of juvenile-detention losers to play football, he basically drags the film into the end zone. Without him, this is bland inspirational sports crap. With him, it's mildly interesting.

score 5 | 10

The Illusionist

Edward Norton, Jessica Biel

The neatest illusion in this flick about a 19th-century Viennese magician who spooks the heir to the Hapsburg throne is that it convinces you Jessica Biel might actually be capable of acting. The other stars in the film—aside from Norton there's Paul Giamatti and Rufus Sewell—are not at all hard to believe in this regard. But Biel, star of *Blade: Trinity* and *Stealth*? That's a nice trick. I'd like to see it again.

score 7.5 | 10

Flyboys

James Franco, Jean Reno

This vaguely historical film focuses on the American pilots who flew for the French before the U.S. entered World War I, which ensures that the filmmakers can play with history all they want since no one remembers anything about WWI anyway. The main draw: spectacular dogfight scenes with computer-generated biplanes and blimps; if you come out of this thinking, "That'd make a great PS3 game," you're not alone.

score 6 | 10

Idiocracy

Luke Wilson, Maya Rudolph

Poor Mike Judge. It seems like his films are destined to become cult hits on DVD, if only because they hardly get released in the theaters. This witheringly funny satire about an average guy being unfrozen in a future in which everyone is a moron was held up for release for two years and then dumped in just a handful of theaters. Looks like some movie studio execs will be amply represented in the future is all I'm saying.

score 2 | 10

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning

Owen Wilson, Matt Dillon

The whole *Chainsaw Massacre* thing is so played out that the filmmakers were pretty much required to make this a prequel, because that's the only way they could be assured their characters didn't know anything about the southern-fried psychopaths. Alas, the rest of us don't have that luxury. If you're coming for is the gore, you'll be fine. If you want anything else, move along.

score 2 | 10

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replay

Revving up the PlayStation wayback machine

HDTV 98

The time is right to start shopping for that HDTV you've been thinking about. We'll tell you what to look for.

FORGOTTEN GEM 104

Before *Lair* there was *Drakengaard*...which sucked. But before that was *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates*, which didn't!

YOUR FIRST TIME 105

His name is Jason Mewes, but you probably know him better as just "Jay." Find out how Silent Bob's hetero lifemate got into gaming.

HDTV

the time is now

By Robert Heron

[Editor's note: This piece originally appeared in the December 26, 2006 issue of Ziff Davis' own PC Magazine. It is reprinted here (in a slightly abbreviated form) because, well, they know a hell of a lot more about this stuff than we do. Check out the issue—and www.pcmag.com—for even more in-depth HDTV info.]

Let's face it: The PlayStation 3 is half-wasted hardware if it's not connected to a high-definition display. But until recently, most of us haven't been able to afford the astronomical prices that come along with HDTV. Thankfully, all that's changing.

Now is the best time yet to buy an HDTV. Prices are affordable to mere mortals, and fierce competition among manufacturers—as well as a little prodding from Congress—has resulted in a wide selection of displays that deliver high-definition enjoyment in a variety of styles to suit any taste.

Let's start with the basics: With HDTVs, image quality is what separates the average from the amazing. With the lifespan of some of today's televisions measured in decades, choosing the right HDTV becomes even more important, as you may very well be staring at it for a long time. Fortunately, understanding your needs and what to look for in an HDTV will simplify your decision.

In this story, we include essential information about the HDTVs we've recently reviewed (page 100). You'll find the complete reviews—and many more of them—at go.pcmag.com/HDTVs, along with tips to help you make the right buying decision and links to tons more HDTV information.

FROM ANALOG TO DIGITAL TV

Although HD was originally demonstrated as an analog technology, nowadays, high-definition television is digital television, albeit the best-looking parts. The digital television (DTV) standard developed by the Advanced Television Systems Committee lists numerous standard and high-definition video formats that all HDTVs must be able to process and properly display.

Here in the U.S., Congress passed a law marking February 17, 2009 as the cutoff date for analog broadcast television—although we doubt many will notice its demise. Most people in the U.S. receive their TV programming via cable or satellite service, and these providers (satellite in particular) are well on their way toward all-digital distribution. That said, broadcast (or terrestrial) DTV does offer several important advantages over the analog system it will replace: higher quality and improved efficiency while remaining free of charge.

High-definition television is digital television

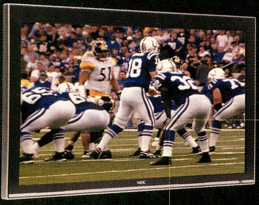
Keep in mind that DTV doesn't automatically equal HDTV. A digital broadcaster may use the same bandwidth that a single analog channel occupied to provide multiple channels of standard-definition programming. Or a broadcaster might use that same bandwidth to deliver a single high-quality HD channel complete with 5.1 Dolby Digital audio. While we don't know anyone who still uses an antenna to receive analog TV, there are many people using antennae to access terrestrial DTV: At last count, there were more than 1,500 DTV stations broadcasting locally in cities across the country.

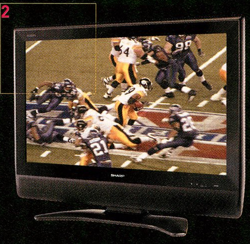
YOUR FAVORITE SHOWS, NOW IN HIGH-DEF

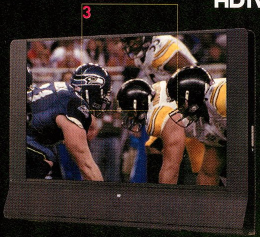
In addition to the growing geographical coverage of terrestrial DTV, cable and satellite providers continue to expand their offerings of HD programming. Digital video recorders such as the TiVo Series3 and other set-top boxes let cable subscribers time-shift HD programs, and the satellite television providers are several generations into their offerings of HD DVR hardware.

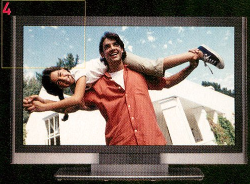
PCs factor in as well. Computers have long been capable of HD resolutions, and home-theater PCs continue to evolve from their hobbyist beginnings into powerful multimedia platforms that aim for easy integration into your HD family room.

Perhaps the most important new sources of HD content to arrive on the scene this year are the Toshiba-backed HD-DVD and Sony-backed Blu-ray disc formats.









1. NEC 42XR4 2. SHARP AQUOS LC-32D40U 3. HP PAVILION MD5800N 4. WESTINGHOUSE LVM-42W2 5. PIONEER PDP-5060HD

HDTV101

1080P PROGRESSIVE A reference to 1,920-by-1,080 progressive-scan resolution, the maximum resolution specified in the digital-television standard (ATSC), and the highest resolu-tion offered by modern high-definition televisions. 1080p is also the current resolution standard used in commercial digital filmmaking.

DCR The TV provides a CableCARD slot allowing digital-cable subscribers to insert a small card into their TV instead of using a stand-alone set-top box.

EDTV Enhanced-definition television refers to widescreen TVs that provide less than half the resolution of an HDTV.

Full HD A term some manufacturers are using to indicate that the TV has 1080p resolution and can accept a 1080p video signal. Beware of older "1080p" HDTVs that are unable to accept a 1080p video signal. Check the manual to confirm which input resolutions are supported by a particular display.

HDMI High-Definition Multimedia Interface is a common digital connection that supports audio and video over a single cable. A good HDTV will provide at least two of these connections.

HDTV A widescreen TV that has a digital terrestrial tuner and provides at least 720 lines of vertical resolution. Also refers to widescreen video that provides at least 720 vertical lines of detail.

HD ready The TV doesn't include a digital terrestrial tuner (broad-cast/over-the-air). HD monitors are in this category. For cable/satellite subscribers, the lack of an integrated digital tuner may not matter at all.

SDTV Standard-definition TV is regular TV or video.

While both formats share many technical similarities, they remain incompatible, and they're expensive compared with the standard-definition DVD disc systems they're designed to replace.

These high-definition disc formats represent the highest-quality HD video sources available to consumers: up to six-times the resolution of DVD video and up to three times the data per second of cable or satellite HD programs—numbers critical for maintaining high image quality with complex video content. Even with significant early-adoption hurdles, HD-DVD and Blu-ray stand poised to become the new standard for consumer video.

BUYING AN HDTV

With so many HDTVs to choose from, selecting the best one may seem like a daunting task, but we have some suggestions that will narrow the contenders to a manageable few. Ultimately, screen size and your budget will determine the right display technology for you. After that, you can focus on what constitutes a "good" picture and decide if the model you are considering appeals to your sense of style. See the chart on page 102 to help with your decisions.

For HDTVs with screen sizes up to 36 inches, CRTs deliver the best bang for your buck. CRT remains the gold standard for display quality, and until very recently, the classic tube remained unmatched.

The downsides of CRT-based HDTVs are size and weight. A 36-inch tube-based HDTV can weigh over 200 pounds, and can takes up a LOT of space. This is where liquid-crystal displays become the next best HDTV of choice. Available in sizes from sub-13-inch to 65-inch behemoths, LCD TVs 40 inches and smaller represent the best value. LCD TVs' bright picture and antireflective screens are ideal for areas where sunlight is a factor.

For screens larger than 40 inches, plasma display panels are a better flat-panel value, especially among the common 42-inch and 50-inch sizes. Even better, the intense competition among plasma-display manufacturers has resulted in lower prices, better picture quality, and increased longevity—and that means earlier problems like burn-in and short lifespans are a thing of the past.

High-definition video makes any HDTV look its best, but 42-inch HD plasmas are among our favorites for watching DVD movies. Some 50-inch models cost half what they did a year or two ago, but the largest models still command premium prices.

Inch for inch, rear-projection televisions offer the best value in big screen HDTVs. Common RPTV screen sizes start at 42 inches and top out at over 70. They can't match the viewing angles of plasma displays, but with proper placement and seating position, RPTVs' image quality can exceed that of any flat-panel display.

Finally, make sure that the HDTV you are considering provides the right video inputs and enough of them to ensure the best picture quality with a variety of sources. The two most common video inputs associated with high-definition video are component and HDMI. Component video is a common connection available on many progressive-scan DVD players and videogame consoles (including even the venerable PS2). So aside from your PS3 and any other source device offering a digital video output such as HDMI or DVI, a component video connection is the way to go.

42-inch plasmas are among our favorites for DVDs

Nowadays, most HDTVs provide at least two component video inputs. Manufacturers are starting to equip their sets with two or more digital video inputs as well. When you use a TV's digital video input with sources that provide a digital video output, you get better image quality because there are fewer analog-to-digital conversions along the signal path.

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT RESOLUTION

One often-confusing aspect of HDTV technology is resolution. To carry the HDTV label or be described as an "HD monitor," a display must provide at least 720 lines

HDTVs in depth

PRODUCT	Price	Rating	Pros	Cons	Noteworthy	Link
LCD						
Sharp AQUOS LC-32D40U	$1,100 street	4.5	Best-looking picture we've seen from a 32-inch LCD HDTV.	No dedicated PC video inputs.	Adjustable backlight makes it easy to optimize picture for room-lighting conditions.	go.pcmag.com/32d40u
Westinghouse LTV-32w3 HD	$850 street	4	Effective video processor helps keep artifacts to a minimum.	Limited color controls.	Improved remote control.	go.pcmag.com/ltv32w3
Westinghouse LVM-42w2	$1,500 street	3.5	Detailed 1080p imagery with lots of 1080p-ready inputs.	Color could have been better.	A great value for a 42-inch 1080p flat-panel display.	go.pcmag.com/lvm42w2
ViewSonic N3760w	$1,200 street	3	A solid HDTV at a good price.	Single digital video input is limiting.	Impressive color and viewing angles for a value-priced HDTV.	go.pcmag.com/n3760w
Sony Bravia KDL-V40XBR1	$2,300 street	2.5	Superb SD/HD imagery—once properly configured.	Single digital-video input is limiting.	Customizable menu system.	go.pcmag.com/bravia40
Sceptre X37SV-Naga	$1,600 street	2	A stylish 37-inch 1080p HDTV.	Limited picture controls and a weak video processor.	One of the least-expensive 37-inch 1080p HDTVs. (Seen in stores for under $1,000.)	go.pcmag.com/sceptrex37
Philips 42PF9831D/37 Flat HDTV	$3,699 direct	2.5	Excellent clarity with fast-moving imagery.	Below-average performance with SD video. Black levels a bit too bright.	Lighting system surrounds display with complementary colors.	go.pcmag.com/PhilipsFlathdtv
Plasma						
NEC 42XR4	$2,500 street	4	Beautiful image quality.	Professional installation recommended.	Display only—stand or speakers are optional.	go.pcmag.com/nec42xr4
Pioneer PDP-5060HD	$3,000 street	4	Pleasing, natural imagery. Good-sounding speakers.	Odd HDMI/component video input "sharing."	External "media receiver" places AV connections near components.	go.pcmag.com/5060hd
Vizio P50 HDM	$1,999 direct	4	A great price for a good-looking 50-inch plasma display.	Improper image scaling with 1080i content.	Effective video processor and good remote control.	go.pcmag.com/p50hdm
Rear-projection						
HP Pavilion md5880n	$3,599 list	4	Impressive picture and sound quality. 1080p input via HDMI.	PC input (VGA) doesn't support 1080p resolution.	All AV connections are accessible from the front of the TV.	go.pcmag.com/md5880n
Front-projector						
Canon Realis SX50	$5,000 street	4	LCoS technology provides excellent brightness and color.	Native SXGA+ resolution (1400 x 1050) requires scaling for HDTV.	One of the few front-projectors with neither a rainbow effect nor a screen door effect.	go.pcmag.com/realissx50
For more HDTV reviews online: go.pcmag.com/HDTVs		out of 5				

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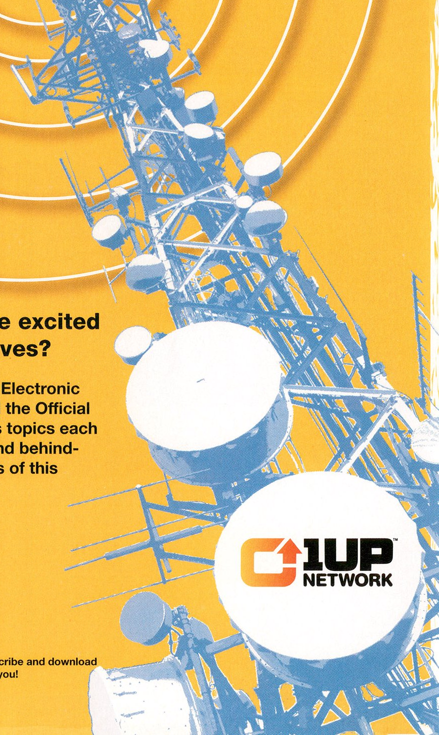

Want to hear what our editors are excited about before your next issue arrives?

Tune in to 1UP Radio where the editors of 1UP, Electronic Gaming Monthly, Computer Gaming World, and the Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine sound off on various topics each week. Each episode is filled with juicy tidbits and behind-the-scenes info that we couldn't fit in the pages of this magazine.

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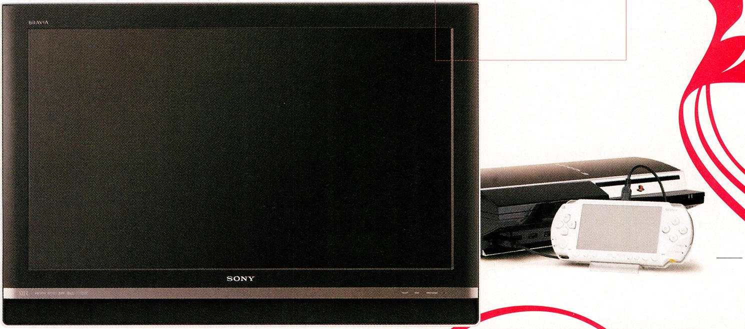


Sony Bravia KDL-V40XBR1

Display Technology	Relative Pricing	Pros	Cons	Notes
Plasma display panel (PDP)	Best flat-panel value for 42-inch screen sizes and larger. We've seen 42-inch HD plasmas in stores for $1,300.	Excellent viewing angles. Good for video containing fast motion. Good color representation.	Best-suited for dimly lit environments. Best value among larger flat-panel displays.	Sizes range from 37 inches to 103 inches.
Liquid-crystal Display (LCD)	Best flat-panel value for screen sizes under 42 inches. A few 37-inch LCD HDTVs can be had for under $1,000.	Bright images. Antireflective screen. Detailed picture.	Often too bright for dimly lit environments. Motion smearing and viewing-angle issues with some models.	Expensive technology when considering 50-inch-and-larger screens.
Rear-projection (DLP, LCoS)	Looking for a 60-inch 1080p HDTV for under $5,000? A rear-projection TV is the easy answer.	Bright images. Best value among big-screen HDTVs.	Some designs limit viewing angles.	Some LCoS-based TVs are the new reference standard.
Front-projection (DLP, LCoS, LCD)	Entry-level 720p projectors are now available for under $1,000.	Potentially the best home-theater display. Essentially unlimited screen size.	Don't forget a good surround-sound speaker setup. Room considerations include space and ambient lighting. High-end models are pricey.	When properly configured, a quality front-projection setup provides the most impressive and immersive HD experience.

of vertical resolution and have a screen with a 16:9 aspect ratio—that is, the picture is a rectangle 16 units wide by 9 units high.

For high-definition video, the two most common formats are 720p and 1080i. The resolution of 720p video is 1,280 by 720 pixels, and this format is delivered as 60 progressively (hence the "p") scanned *frames* per second. The resolution of 1080i video is 1,920 by 1,080 pixels and is delivered as 60 interlaced (hence the "i") *fields* per second (equivalent to 30 frames per second). The important point to remember is that regardless of an HDTV's physical or "native" resolution (how many discrete pixels the screen provides), any HDTV will display a picture when fed a 720p or 1080i video signal.

Ideally, the best HDTV image quality is achieved when the resolution of the source material perfectly matches the resolution of the display device, but in the real world, this is rarely the case. Many high-definition LCD and plasma displays provide a native resolution of 1,366 by 768 pixels—slightly greater than 720p resolution but only about half of the pixels needed to resolve all of the details of 1080i video. Video-processing hardware incorporated into all HDTVs stretches or decimates the video as needed to make it fit the screen. Also, most HDTVs in stores today are progressive-scan displays that automatically convert (de-interlace) interlaced video such as 480i or 1080i into the display's progressive format. Of course, how well a particular HDTV performs this important conversion has a direct impact on overall image quality.

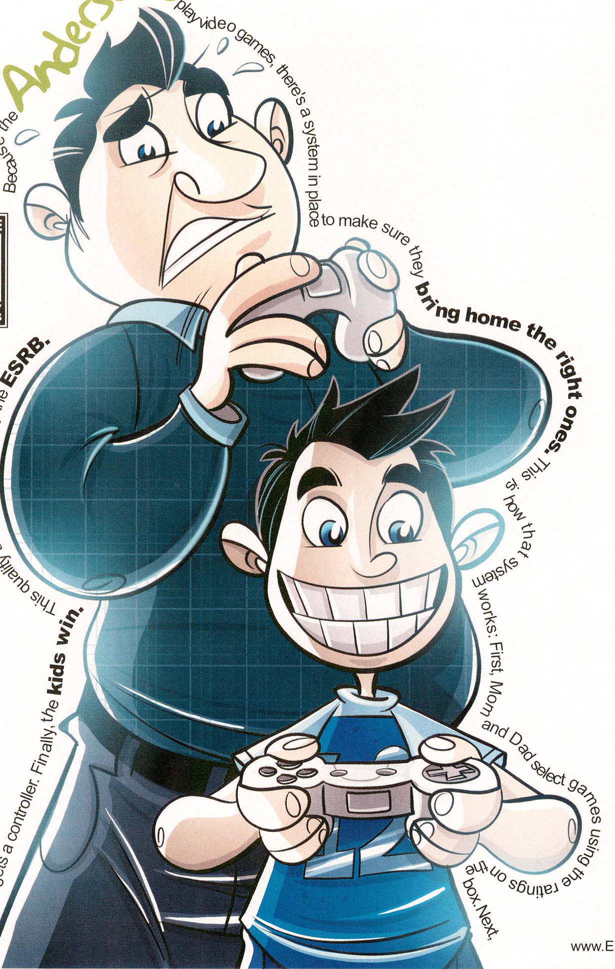
1080p is a must for screens larger than 50 inches

High-definition displays that provide native 1080p resolution (1,920 by 1,080 pixels) are now available in sizes starting at 37 inches for LCD TVs and 42 inches for rear-projection televisions. Pioneer and Panasonic have also introduced 1080p plasma display panels at 50 inches and 65 inches respectively. A display with 1080p resolution is a good match for 1080i video sources, but they really shine when fed a native 1080p signal like that being pumped out by many PS3 games and Blu-ray movies. With true 1080p, the additional pixels help create a smoother picture that looks better even if you're just a few feet in front of the screen. The rule of thumb is that 1080p resolution is a must for screens larger than 50 inches. At 50 inches or smaller, you would need to sit fairly close to note any appreciable improvements the extra pixels would offer.

YOUR BOTTOM LINE

Truth is, there's almost too much information out there about high-def television. It's not unlike the information glut that accompanied the early days of consumer PCs: too many options, and no clear winner—only the option that's best for you. This story, along with *PC Magazine*'s extensive online reviews and resources, should clear up much of the HDTV picture, or at least set you on the path to making the right decision for your space and your wallet. |

Robert Heron manages PC Magazine's *West Coast HDTV test lab and co-hosts the online video show* DL.TV.



Because the **Andersons** play video games, there's a system in place to make sure they **bring home the right ones.** This is how that system works: First, Mom and Dad select games using the ratings on the box. Next, everyone gets a controller. Finally, the **kids win.** This quality time is presented by the **ESRB.**

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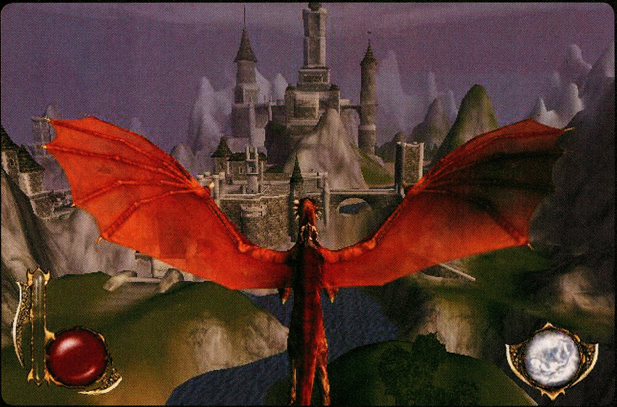
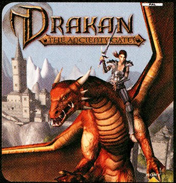


THE SAGA CONTINUES...

Upon firing up *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates*, players are treated to a fairly lengthy backstory regarding how Rynn and Arokh met, and their adventures up until this point. This is actually a summary of the first game in the series—*Drakan: Order of the Flame*—which was released on the PC in 1999 by Psygnosis (which Sony acquired back in 1993). It featured the same seamless combination of melee and airborne combat found in the PlayStation 2 sequel.

DRAKAN:

THE ANCIENTS' GATES



Dragons took flight long before Lair

One of the most anticipated games for the shiny new PlayStation 3 is *Lair*. Aerial dogfighting upon the back of a dragon just looks and sounds way too cool, especially since it's crafted by none other than Factor 5, the folks behind the spectacular *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* series on Nintendo's N64 and GameCube consoles.

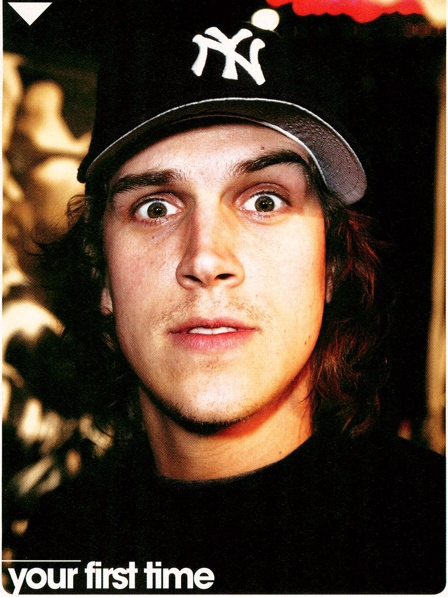
But this isn't entirely virgin territory for the PlayStation family. In fact, a more ambitious—and surprisingly decent—dragon-rider game was released back in 2002. *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates* was a pseudo-free-roaming adventure game that saw its main character, Rynn, on a quest to release the captive Spirit Dragons to save the dying world of Drakan.

To do so, she could buy various types of weapons (all of which built up particular skill points as Rynn used them) and tackle evil imps, orcs, and various other mystical creatures on foot. The hand-to-hand combat was decent enough, if a bit dated by today's standards, what with almost nonexistent camera controls and a "tank" interface for our hero. Basically, the on-foot stuff looked and felt like an open-world *Tomb Raider* game, right down to the svelte female protagonist. And we mean that in a good way.

To cross greater distances, or to fight off other airborne enemies, Rynn hops on dragon Arokh's back and takes to the skies. As our original review read; "[The dragon riding is] fantastic! Certainly not perfect, especially when right near the ground, but the controls are solid and versatile, and the whole experience seems appropriately majestic. It's exactly how I would have pictured dragon riding back in my trashy fantasy-novel days."

Drakan has a sort of PC RPG feel, along the same vein as something like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or the *Ultima* series. Though you're much more constricted in regards to the main quest, side quests abound as you explore every nook and cranny of each new area, talking to whomever you can find. The illusion of total freedom within the game world is really convincing, especially for a console game this long in the tooth.

Still, if you're jonesing for a bit of virtual dragon flight and the wait for *Lair*'s 2007 release is totally unbearable, finding a copy of this forgotten gem in the bargain bin may be just what you need. *Drakan* is showing its age, but if you look past the rusty veneer, you'll find an enjoyable little game. | **Greg Sewart**



Getty Images

Jason Mewes

Clerks II star Jason Mewes remembers how he scored a free PS1

You'd think that being in a bunch of Kevin Smith's movies would be a real bummer. When you're not stuck standing outside a convenience store or fast-food joint for hours on end doing nothing, then you're busy running around Hollywood with a monkey, trying to stop a movie about yourself from being made. Plus, you have some tubby bearded dude telling you what to do all the time. But according to Jason Mewes—who's been Silent Bob's hetero lifemate Jay in all but one of Smith's flicks—there's actually one very nice perk to being one of Smith's regular players: free PlayStations and videogames.

"We started going to comic-book conventions around the time we did *Mallrats* or *Dogma*—it was 1997, I believe—and I think it was at the first one we went to that PlayStation had a booth. We wound up meeting this woman from Sony there, and she sent me a PlayStation and some games, and they've been sending me games ever since. Back then, the games I played a lot were *Syphon Filter*, *Tomb Raider*, and hockey. My friends and I have always been into hockey games. I also liked *Dino Crisis*; that was one of the first games I really liked. Lately, I've been playing a lot of *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs*—that's pretty fun. And I just got *God Of War*, which looks cool—I just haven't played it yet." | **Paul Semel**

| Dino Crisis

| SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs

| Syphon Filter

PSI-DERLAND

FIRST FANTASY

by Jeremy Parish

When he's not trying to reclaim his vanished youth with obsolete games, Jeremy works as 1UP.com's features editor and charming mascot. Check out his blog at toastyfrog.1UP.com.

Final Fantasy XII is the Last Big Thing for the PlayStation 2. It's a fine way to mark the end of the system's six-year run and the thousands of games to which it has played host. Sure, there'll be other worthwhile PS2 games over the coming year—*Rogue Galaxy*, *Dawn of Mana*, *God of War II*—but *FFXII* squeaked in just before the PlayStation 3 arrived. It's, you know, symbolic.

And a wholly appropriate symbol at that. The *Final Fantasy* series has been a major factor in the success of Sony's console line. It's no coincidence that the PS1 exploded right about the time that *Final Fantasy VII* arrived.

FFVII was a landmark in many respects. It got Americans hooked on console RPGs. It pioneered the seamless integration of gameplay and FMV, too. No more washed-up TV stars stumbling through cheap Z-movie-grade footage—the moment that train pulled up to the reactor station in Midgar and Cloud Strife hopped off was the moment that everyone suddenly realized, "Hey, there's more to the CD format than cheesy arrangements and bad Siliwood flicks!" Cinematic games didn't have to forsake their intrinsic, uh, gameness.

But for a lot of gamers, *FFVII*'s true significance was that it was a PlayStation title. For years, Square and Nintendo had been inseparable. Adventure-loving gamers favored the Super NES over Sega's Genesis simply because it was the only place to find games like *Secret of Mana* and *Chrono Trigger*. And Nintendo had published the original *Final Fantasy* in America. The last major SNES game was Square's *Super Mario RPG*.

FFVII was a landmark in many respects.

So the fact that *FFVII* appeared on Sony's console rather than Nintendo's meant something was amiss. After all, we'd all seen that 3D demo that depicted characters from *Final Fantasy VI* beating up monsters in real time—a demo that was supposed to have been proof-of-concept for a Nintendo 64-based *Final Fantasy*. But there was Cloud Strife, in cahoots with the Bandicoot.

The obvious explanation, of course, was that the Nintendo 64's cartridge format simply couldn't contain all the FMV data that games like *FFVII* required. Square's designers were said to have been deeply frustrated late in the Super Nintendo's lifecycle, since the limited storage capacity of carts cramped their creations and made them prohibitively expensive. (*Chrono Trigger* cost more than $100 in Japan at the time of its release.) The cheap, capacious CD format was a godsend...even if it did make for some nasty load times.

But there was more to it than that. The real problem was the Nintendo had lost touch with what gamers and game designers wanted, and when it became clear that the N64 would be at once incredibly limiting and incredibly expensive, plenty of developers jumped ship. Of course, we at home didn't really see the behind-the-scenes drama or stop to consider the needs of developers. We just knew that the best games were showing up on a non-Nintendo system, and that didn't bode well for the N64. Where *Final Fantasy* goes, so go gamers. And for all our misgivings about the PS3, all those *FFXIII* variants on their way to Sony's shiny new system can only mean good things. | Jeremy Parish

IN MY DAY

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED YOUR STAY...

We just got back from a visit to the PlayStation Store here in San Francisco. It's November 16, 2006, a little after noon—less than 12 hours until the PS3 goes on sale. There are some 700 people in line at last count. As we walked down the seemingly endless lines, past the Sony employees handing out tacos, soda, and coffee, through the shantytown at the corner of Fourth and Howard, I noticed a sort of subliminal buzzing in the air: A new era was about to begin.

It reminded me of the morning of June 19, 1997. I was having breakfast with the rest of the staff of *P.S.X.* at some forgotten hotel in Atlanta, getting ready for the first day of my first E3. Suddenly one of our supervisors walked in and gave us the news: After months of pitching, we had finally been awarded a PlayStation license. We were about to become *the* official PlayStation magazine in the U.S. (Now if we could only come up with a *name*....) At that table was the same feeling of excitement that I saw in the faces of those camped out on the damp, cold, smelly streets of San Francisco. A new day was dawning.

But as in many other parts of life, when a new era rises, an old era falls. And progress stops for no man...and no magazine.

As I look back on the past 112 issues of *OPM*, I find a great deal to be proud of. There were features that hit all the right notes, layouts that fairly leapt off the page, reviews that hit dead-on with precision and wit. We championed some underdogs, raised a few hackles, and slaughtered a few sacred cows. We yelled at each other a lot, and then made up afterward. We drank a lot of free booze. We made a lot of tasteless jokes. We did nothing perfect, but we did a lot right—and more importantly, we did a lot we could be proud of.

But these are just pages in a magazine about videogames. What we did over these past nine years wasn't rocket science. Perhaps we turned you on to a game you wouldn't have otherwise tried, or warned you away from that steaming pile of crap you were about to unwittingly spend your hard-earned money on. It's not feeding the poor or curing cancer. But if we brought just a little bit more joy into the world, if we helped you smile or laugh or just perk up a little from a bad day—well then, we certainly did our jobs.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to do that. Although I've lost touch with some of these people over the years, I'm fairly certain I can speak for Wat, Kraig, John, Tom, Dindo, Dan, Gary, Dana, Bob, Jim, Donna, Jason, Tina, Ryan, Alé, Logan, Gary, Dave, Mark, Todd, Sam, C-Bake, Scooter, and Giancarlo when I say: Thank you for bringing us into your lives, in however small a capacity. And thanks to you, my current and former colleagues, for your talent, support, friendship, and intellectual stimulation through my one hundred and twenty-five (!!) deadlines.

It's been a fun ride, folks. Thanks for riding along. Don't be surprised if you see us popping up in some of Uncle Ziff's other fine publications. Until then, allow me to borrow an appropriate line from Roger Zelazny:

Goodbye and hello, as always. |

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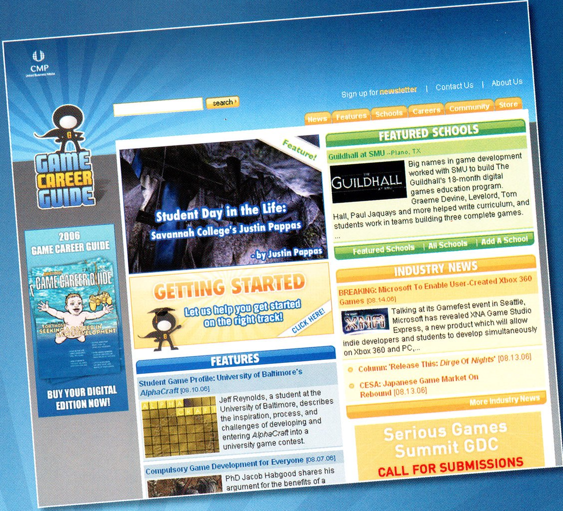
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- by Justin Pappas

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Guildhall at SMU --Plano, TX

Big names in game development worked with SMU to build The Guildhall's 18-month digital games education program. Graeme Devine, Levelord, Tom Hall, Paul Jaquays and more helped write curriculum, and students work in teams building three complete games. ...

FEATURES

Student Game Profile: University of Baltimore's *AlphaCraft* [08.10.06]

Jeff Reynolds, a student at the University of Baltimore, describes the inspiration, process, and challenges of developing and entering *AlphaCraft* into a university game contest.

Compulsory Game Development for Everyone [08.07.06]

PhD Jacob Habgood shares his argument for the benefits of a

INDUSTRY NEWS

BREAKING: Microsoft To Enable User-Created Xbox 360 Games [08.14.06]

Talking at its Gamefest event in Seattle, Microsoft has revealed XNA Game Studio Express, a new product which will allow indie developers and students to develop simultaneously on Xbox 360 and PC,...

- Column: 'Release This: *Dirge Of Nights*' [08.13.06]
- CESA: Japanese Game Market On Rebound [08.13.06]

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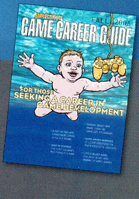
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